Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

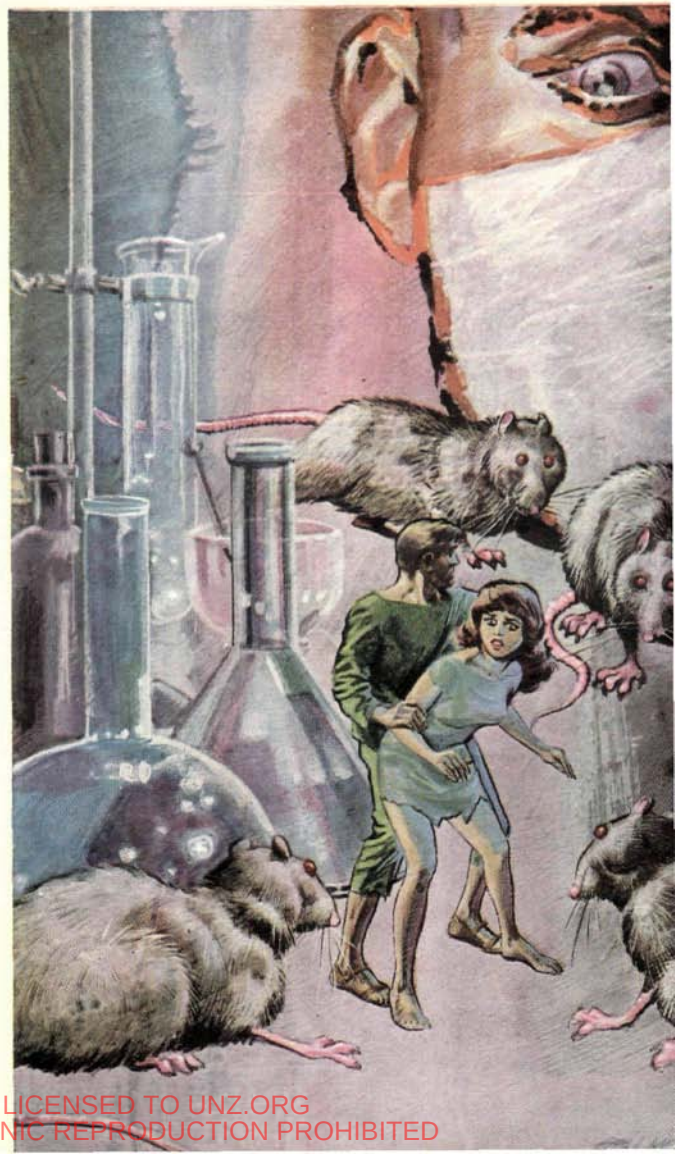
OCTOBER 1967
60¢

SEVENTEENTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
we celebrate
with a novelette
by OUR FIRST EDITOR
THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF WAMBA'S REVENGE
by H. L. GOLD

and anniversary appearances by various other notables, including
UNDERSTANDING
by GEORGE O. SMITH
(his 25th anniversary in science fiction)

DAMNATION ALLEY
by ROGER ZELAZNY
(representing his 17th anniversary)

and a portfolio of fashions of the future from the GALAXY FASHION SHOW with text by
FREDERIK POHL
(his 30th science-fiction anniversary)



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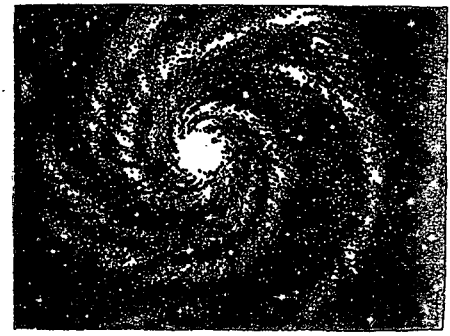

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THIRTY LONG YEARS

As you may have noted by the cover of this issue, we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary in science fiction this month. That first sale wasn't a story; it was a poem (and we would take it as a personal favor if no one ever looked it up); and calling this the thirtieth anniversary is at least approximately true. That is, the thing was published in October, 1937, all right. But it was written in 1935 . . . accepted in 1936 . . . and paid for in 1938, because that was how things were in the science-fiction field in those days.

It seems to us that those days were quite a long time ago. No television to sell us what we don't need. No nuclear weapons to keep us looking over our shoulders. No human beings in space; no jet aircraft; no Pill, no LSD. We used to correspond (with other science-fiction fans, of course) in England, and a one-up thing to do was to time one's letter-writing so as to catch a fast Cunarder or the almost-as-fast *Normandie;* with luck, those thirty-knot liners could get a letter to its recipient across the ocean in five days. (Now we have five hundred and fifty knot aircraft, of course — and with luck we can get a letter across in *four* days.)

One other thing that was very different in those days was that people didn't ask us (as they do now; all the time, they do it) how in the world we were going to keep on writing science fiction, now that science itself had made so much of it come true. *Au contraire,* as the French say. If the non-sf addicts ever noticed us at all, it was primarily to tell us how crazy we were, to be writing about things which could never *ever* come true, like the aforementioned TV, atomic weapons, space travel, *et al.*

So how do we keep on writing science fiction? Why, we just write about the things that haven't happened *yet.* And, as you will see from an examination of this magazine, that gives us plenty of scope, for a long time to come . . . . — THE EDITOR

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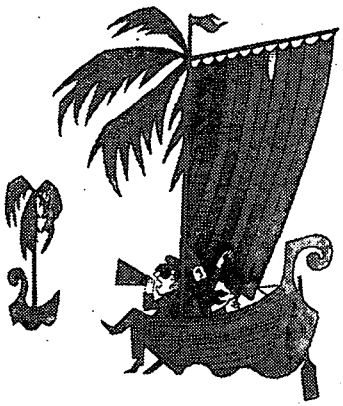
BACK THROUGH TIME, FORTH THROUGH SPACE... WITH DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION



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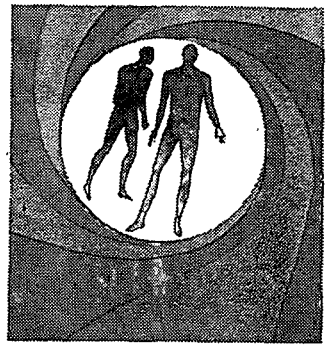

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DAMNATION ALLEY

Come ride along Damnation Alley — hell's own highway, crossing the U.S.A. from coast to coast!

by ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

I

The gull swooped by, seemed to hover a moment on unmoving wings.

Hell Tanner flipped his cigar butt at it and scored a lucky hit. The bird uttered a hoarse cry and beat suddenly at the air. It climbed about fifty feet, and whether it shrieked a second time, he would never know.

It was gone.

A single gray feather rocked in the violet sky, drifted out over the edge of the cliff and descended, swinging, toward the ocean. Tanner chuckled through his

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beard, between the steady roar of the wind and the pounding of the surf. Then he took his feet down from the handlebars, kicked up the stand and gunned his bike to life.

He took the slope slowly till he came to the trail, then picked up speed and was doing fifty when he hit the highway.

He leaned forward and gunned it. He had the road all to himself, and he laid on the gas pedal till there was no place left for it to go. He raised his goggles and looked at the world through crud-colored glasses, which was pretty much the way he looked at it without them, too.

All the old irons were gone from his jacket, and he missed the swastika, the hammer and sickle and the upright finger, especially. He missed his old emblem, too. Maybe he could pick one up in Tijuana and have some broad sew it on and . . . . No. It wouldn't do. All that was dead and gone. It would be a giveaway, and he wouldn't last a day. What he *would* do was sell the Harley, work his way down the coast, clean and square and see what he could find in the other America.

He coasted down one hill and roared up another. He tore through Laguna Beach, Capistrano Beach, San Clemente and San Onofre. He made it down to Oceanside, where he refueled, and he passed on through Carlsbad and all those dead little beaches that fill the shore space before Solana Beach Del Mar. It was outside San Diego that they were waiting for him.

He saw the roadblock and turned. They were not sure how he had managed it that quickly, at that speed. But now he was heading away from them. He heard the gunshots and kept going. Then he heard the sirens.

He blew his horn twice in reply and leaned far forward. The Harley leaped ahead, and he wondered whether they were radioing to someone further on up the line.

He ran for ten minutes and couldn't shake them. Then fifteen.

He topped another hill, and far ahead he saw the second block. He was bottled in.

He looked all around him for side roads, saw none.

Then he bore a straight course toward the second block. Might as well try to run it.

No good!

There were cars lined up across the entire road. They were even off the road on the shoulders.

He braked at the last possible minute, and when his speed was right he reared up on the back

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wheel, spun it and headed back toward his pursuers.

There were six of them coming toward him, and at his back new siren calls arose.

He braked again, pulled to the left, kicked the gas and leaped out of the seat. The bike kept going, and he hit the ground rolling, got to his feet and started running.

He heard the screeching of their tires. He heard a crash. Then there were more gunshots, and he kept going. They were aiming over his head, but he didn't know it. They wanted him alive.

After fifteen minutes he was backed against a wall of rock, and they were fanned out in front of him, and several had rifles, and they were all pointed in the wrong direction.

He dropped the tire iron he held and raised his hands.

"You got it, citizens," he said. "Take it away."

And they did.

They handcuffed him and took him back to the cars. They pushed him into the rear seat of one, and an officer got in on either side of him. Another got into the front beside the driver, and this one held a sawed-off shotgun across his knees.

The driver started the engine and put the car into gear, heading back up 101.

The man with the shotgun turned and stared through bifocals that made his eyes look like hourglasses filled with green sand as he lowered his head. He stared for perhaps ten seconds, then said, "That was a stupid thing to do."

Hell Tanner stared back until the man said, "Very stupid, Tanner."

"Oh, I didn't know you were talking to me."

"I'm looking at you, son."

"And I'm looking at you. Hello, there."

Then the driver said, without taking his eyes off the road, "You know, it's too bad we've got to deliver him in good shape — after the way he smashed up the other car with that damn bike."

"He could still have an accident. Fall and crack a couple ribs, say," said the man to Tanner's left.

The man to the right didn't say anything, but the man with the shotgun shook his head slowly. "Not unless he tries to escape," he said. "L.A. wants him in good shape.

"Why'd you try to skip out, buddy? You might have known we'd pick you up."

Tanner shrugged.

"Why'd you pick me up? I didn't do anything?"

The driver chuckled.

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"That's why," he said. "You didn't do anything, and there's something you were supposed to do. Remember?"

"I don't owe anybody anything. They gave me a pardon and let me go."

"You got a lousy memory, kid. You made the nation of California a promise when they turned you loose yesterday. Now you've had more than the twenty-four hours you asked for to settle your affairs. You can tell them 'no' if you want and get your pardon revoked. Nobody's forcing you. Then you can spend the rest of your life making little rocks out of big ones. We couldn't care less. I heard they got somebody else lined up already."

"Give me a cigarette," Tanner said.

The man on his right lit one and passed it to him.

He raised both hands, accepted it. As he smoked, he flicked the ashes onto the floor.

They sped along the highway, and when they went through towns or encountered traffic the driver would hit the siren and overhead the red light would begin winking. When this occurred, the sirens of the two other patrol cars that followed behind them would also wail. The driver never touched the brake, all the way up to L.A., and he kept radioing ahead every few minutes.

There came a sound like a sonic boom, and a cloud of dust and gravel descended upon them like hail. A tiny crack appeared in the lower right-hand corner of the bullet-proof windshield, and stones the size of marbles bounced on the hood and the roof. The tires made a crunching noise as they passed over the gravel that now lay scattered upon the road surface. The dust hung like a heavy fog, but ten seconds later they had passed out of it.

The men in the car leaned forward and stared upward.

The sky had become purple, and black lines crossed it, moving from west to east. These swelled, narrowed, moved from side to side, sometimes merged. The driver had turned on his lights by then.

"Could be a bad one coming," said the man with the shotgun.

The driver nodded, and, "Looks worse further north, too," he said.

A wailing began, high in the air above them, and the dark bands continued to widen. The sound increased in volume, lost its treble quality, became a steady roar.

The bands consolidated, and the sky grew dark as a starless, moonless night and the dust fell about them in heavy clouds. Oc-

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casionally, there sounded a *ping* as a heavier fragment struck against the car.

The driver switched on his country lights, hit the siren again and sped ahead. The roaring and the sound of the siren fought with one another above them, and far to the north a blue aurora began to spread, pulsing.

Tanner finished his cigarette, and the man gave him another. They were all smoking by then.

"You know, you're lucky we picked you up, boy," said the man to his left. "How'd you like to be pushing your bike through that stuff?"

"I'd like it," Tanner said.

"You're nuts."

"No. I'd make it. It wouldn't be the first time."

By the time they reached Los Angeles, the blue aurora filled half the sky, and it was tinged with pink and shot through with smoky, yellow streaks that reached like spider legs into the south. The roar was a deafening, physical thing that beat upon their eardrums and caused their skin to tingle. As they left the car and crossed the parking lot, heading toward the big, pillared building with the frieze across its forehead, they had to shout at one another in order to be heard.

"Lucky we got here when we did!" said the man with the shotgun. "Step it up!" Their pace increased as they moved toward the stairway, and, "It could break any minute now!" screamed the driver.

II

As they had pulled into the lot, the building had had the appearance of a piece of ice-sculpture, with the shifting lights in the sky playing upon its surfaces and casting cold shadows. Now, though, it seemed as if it were a thing out of wax, ready to melt in an instant's flash of heat.

Their faces and the flesh of their hands took on a bloodless, corpse-like appearance.

They hurried up the stairs, and a State Patrolman let them in through the small door to the right of the heavy metal double doors that were the main entrance to the building. He locked and chained the door behind them, after snapping open his holster when he saw Tanner.

"Which way?" asked the man with the shotgun.

"Second floor," said the trooper, nodding toward a stairway to their right. "Go straight back when you get to the top. It's the big office at the end of the hall."

"Thanks."

The roaring was considerably muffled, and objects achieved an appearance of natural existence

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once more in the artificial light of the building.

They climbed the curving stairway and moved along the corridor that led back into the building. When they reached the final office, the man with the shotgun nodded to his driver. "Knock," he said.

A woman opened the door, started to say something, then stopped and nodded when she saw Tanner. She stepped aside and held the door. "This way," she said, and they moved past her into the office, and she pressed a button on her desk and told the voice that said, "Yes, Mrs. Fiske?": "They're here, with that man, sir."

"Send them in."

She led the to the dark, paneled door in the back of the room and opened it before them.

They entered, and the husky man behind the glass-topped desk leaned backward in his chair and wove his short fingers together in front of his chins and peered over them through eyes just a shade darker than the gray of his hair. His voice was soft and rasped just slightly. "Have a seat." he said to Tanner, and to the others, "Wait outside."

"You know this guy's dangerous, Mister Denton," said the man with the shotgun as Tanner seated himself in a chair situated five feet in front of the desk.

Steel shutters covered the room's three windows, and though the men could not see outside they could guess at the possible furies that stalked there as a sound like machine-gun fire suddenly rang through the room.

"I know."

"Well, he's handcuffed, anyway. Do you want a gun?"

"I've got one."

"Okay, then. We'll be outside."

They left the room.

The two men stared at one another until the door closed, then the man called Denton said, "Are all your affairs settled now?" and the other shrugged. Then, "What the hell *is* your first name, really? Even the records show — "

"Hell," said Tanner. "That's my name. I was the seventh kid in our family, and when I was born the nurse held me up and said to my old man, 'What name do you want on the birth certificate?' and Dad said, 'Hell!' and walked away. So she put it down like that. That's what my brother told me. I never saw my old man to ask if that's how it was. He copped out the same day. Sounds right, though."

"So your mother raised all seven of you?"

"No. She croaked a couple weeks later, and different relatives took us kids."

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"I see," said Denton. "You've still got a choice, you know. Do you want to try it or don't you?"

"What's your job, anyway?" asked Tanner.

"I'm the Secretary of Traffic for the nation of California."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm coordinating this thing. It could as easily have been the Surgeon General or the Postmaster General, but more of it really falls into my area of responsibility. I know the hardware best. I know the odds — "

"What are the odds?" asked Tanner.

For the first time, Denton dropped his eyes.

"Well, it's risky . . . ."

"Nobody's ever done it before, except for that nut who ran it to bring the news, and he's dead. How can you get odds out of that?"

"I know," said Denton slowly. "You're thinking it's a suicide job, and you're probably right. We're sending three cars, with two drivers in each. If any one just makes it close enough, its broadcast signals may serve to guide in a Boston driver. You don't have to go though, you know."

"I know. I'm free to spend the rest of my life in prison."

"You killed three people. You could have gotten the death penalty."

"I didn't, so why talk about it? Look, mister, I don't want to die and I don't want the other bit either."

"Drive or don't drive. Take your choice. But remember, if you drive and you make it, all will be forgiven and you can go your own way. The nation of California will even pay for that motorcycle you appropriated and smashed up, not to mention the damage to that police car."

"Thanks a lot," and the winds boomed on the other side of the wall, and the steady staccato from the window shields filled the room.

"You're a very good driver," said Denton, after a time. "You've driven just about every vehicle there is to drive. You've even raced. Back when you were smuggling, you used to make a monthly run to Salt Lake City. There are very few drivers who'll try that, even today."

Hell Tanner smiled, remembering something.

". . . And in the only legitimate job you ever held, you were the only man who'd make the mail run to Albuquerque. There've only been a few others since you were fired."

"That wasn't my fault."

"You were the best man on the Seattle run, too," Denton continued. "Your supervisor said so.

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What I'm trying to say is that, of anybody we could pick, you've probably got the best chance of getting through. That's why we've been indulgent with you, but we can't afford to wait any longer. It's yes or no right now, and you'll leave within the hour if it's yes."

Tanner raised his cuffed hands and gestured toward the window.

"In all this crap?" he asked.

"The cars can take this storm," said Denton.

"Man, you're crazy."

"People are dying even while we're talking," said Denton.

"So a few more ain't about to make that much difference. Can't we wait till tomorrow?"

"No! A man gave his life to bring us the news! And we've got to get across the continent as fast as possible now or it won't matter! Storm or no storm, the cars leave now! Your feelings on the matter don't mean a good goddamn in the face of this! All I want out of you, Hell, is one word: Which one will it be?"

"I'd like something to eat. I haven't . . . . "

"There's food in the car. What's your answer?"

Hell stared at the dark window.

"Okay," he said, "I'll run Damnation Alley for you. I won't leave without a piece of paper with some writing on it, though."

"I've got it here."

Denton opened a drawer and withdrew a heavy cardboard envelope from which he extracted a piece of stationery bearing the Great Seal of the nation of California. He stood and rounded the desk and handed it to Hell Tanner.

Hell studied it for several minutes, then said, "This says that if I make it to Boston I receive a full pardon for every criminal action I've ever committed within the nation of California . . . ."

"That's right."

"Does that include ones you might not know about now, if someone should come up with them later?"

"That's what it says, Hell — 'every criminal action.' "

"Okay, you're on, fat boy. Get these bracelets off me and show me my car."

The man called Denton moved back to his seat on the other side of his desk.

"Let me tell you something else, Hell," he said. "If you try to cop out anywhere along the route, the other drivers have their orders, and they've agreed to follow them. They will open fire on you and burn you into little bitty ashes. Get the picture?"

"I get the picture," said Hell. "I take it I'm supposed to do them the same favor?"

"That is correct."

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"Good enough. That might be fun."

"I thought you'd like it."

"Now, if you'll unhook me, I'll make the scene for you."

"Not till I've told you what I think of you," Denton said.

"Okay, if you want to waste time calling me names, while people are dying — "

"Shut up! You don't care about them and you know it! I just want to tell you that I think you are the lowest, most reprehensible human being I have ever encountered. You have killed men and raped women. You once gouged out a man's eyes, just for fun. You've been indicted twice for pushing dope and three times as a pimp. You're a drunk and a degenerate, and I don't think you've had a bath since the day you were born. You and your hoodlums terrorized decent people when they were trying to pull their lives together after the war. You stole from them and you asaulted them, and you extorted money and the necessaries of life with the threat of physical violence. I wish you had died in the Big Raid, that night, like all the rest of them. You are not a human being, except from a biological standpoint. You have a big dead spot somewhere inside you where other people have something that lets them live together in society and be neighbors. The only virtue that you possess — if you want to call it that — is that your reflexes may be a little faster, your muscles a little stronger, your eye a bit more wary than the rest of us, so that you can sit behind a wheel and drive through anything that has a way through it. It is for this that the nation of California is willing to pardon your inhumanity if you will use that one virtue to help rather than hurt. I don't approve. I don't want to depend on you, because you're not the type. I'd like to see you die in this thing, and while I hope that somebody makes it through, I hope that it will be somebody else. I hate your bloody guts. You've got your pardon now. The car's ready. Let's go."

Denton stood, at a height of about five feet eight inches, and Tanner stood and looked down at him and chuckled.

"I'll make it," he said. "If that citizen from Boston made it through and died, I'll make it through and live. I've been as far as the Missus Hip."

"You're lying."

"No, I ain't either, and if you ever find out that's straight, remember I got this piece of paper in my pocket — 'every criminal action' and like that. It wasn't easy, and I was lucky, too. But I made it that far and, nobody

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else you know can say that. So I figure that's about halfway, and I can make the other half if I can get that far."

They moved toward the door.

"I don't like to say it and mean it," said Denton, "but good luck. Not for your sake, though."

"Yeah, I know."

Denton opened the door, and, "Turn him loose," he said. "He's driving."

The officer with the shotgun handed it to the man who had given Tanner the cigarettes, and he fished in his pockets for the key. When he found it, he unlocked the cuffs, stepped back, and hung them at his belt; and, "I'll come with you," said Denton. "The motor pool is downstairs."

They left the office, and Mrs. Fiske opened her purse and took a rosary into her hands and bowed her head. She prayed for Boston and she prayed for the soul of its departed messenger. She even threw in a couple for Hell Tanner.

III

They descended to the basement, the sub-basement and the sub-sub-basement.

When they got there, Tanner saw three cars, ready to go; and he saw five men seated on benches along the wall. One of them he recognized.

"Denny," he said, "come here," and he moved forward, and a slim, blond youth who held a crash helmet in his right hand stood and walked toward him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked him.

"I'm second driver in car three."

"You've got your own garage and you've kept your nose clean. What's the thought on this?"

"Denton offered me fifty grand," said Denny, and Hell turned away his face.

"Forget it! It's no good if you're dead!"

"I need the money."

"Why?"

"I want to get married and I can use it."

"I thought you were making out okay."

"I am, but I'd like to buy a house."

"Does your girl know what you've got in mind?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Listen, I've got to do it — it's the only way out for me. You don't have to —"

"That's for me to say."

" — so I'm going to tell you something: You drive out to Pasadena to that place where we used to play when we were kids — with the rocks and the three big trees — you know where I mean?"

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"Yeah, I sure do remember."

"Go back of the big tree in the middle, on the side where I carved my initials. Step off seven steps and dig down around four feet. Got that?"

"Yeah. What's there?"

"That's my legacy, Denny. You'll find one of those old strong boxes, probably all rusted out by now. Bust it open. It'll be full of excelsior, and there'll be a six-inch joint of pipe inside. It's threaded, and there's caps on both ends. There's a little over five grand rolled up inside it, and all the bills are clean."

"Why you telling me this?"

"Because it's yours now," he said, and hit him in the jaw.

When Denny fell, he kicked him in the ribs, three times, before the cops grabbed him and dragged him away.

"You fool!" said Denton as they held him. "You crazy, damned fool!"

"Uh-uh," said Tanner. "No brother of mine is going to run Damnation Alley while I'm around to stomp him and keep him out of the game. Better find another driver quick, because he's got cracked ribs. Or else let me drive alone."

"Then you'll drive alone," said Denton, "because we can't afford to wait around any longer. There's pills in the compartment,

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to keep you awake, and you'd better use them, because if you fall back they'll burn you up. Remember that."

"I won't forget you, mister, if I'm ever back in town. Don't fret about that."

"Then you'd better get into car number two and start heading up the ramp. The vehicles are all loaded. The cargo compartment is under the rear seat."

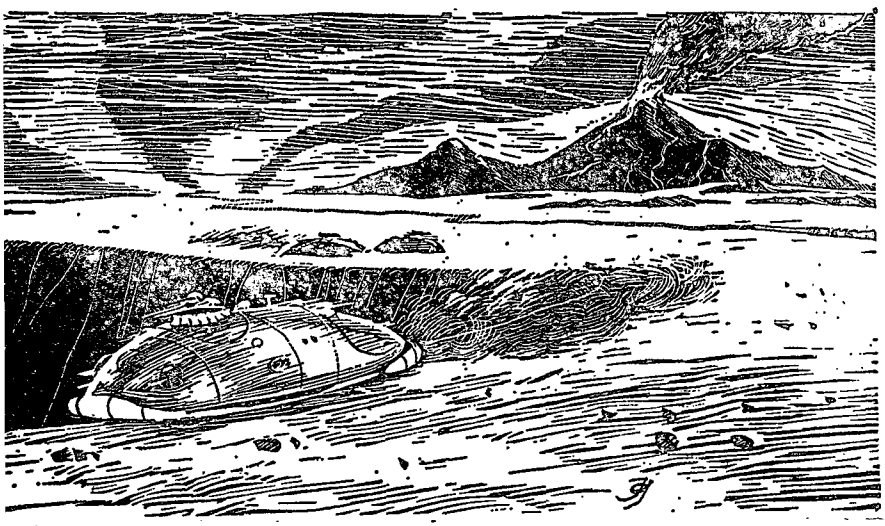
"Yeah, I know."

". . . And if I ever see you again, it'll be too soon. Get out of my sight, scum!"

Tanner spat on the floor and turned his back on the Secretary of Traffic. Several cops were giving first aid to his brother, and one had dashed off in search of a doctor. Denton made two teams of the remaining four drivers and assigned them to cars one and three. Tanner climbed into the cab of his own, started the engine and waited. He stared up the ramp and considered what lay ahead. He searched the compartments until he found cigarettes. He lit one and leaned back.

The other drivers moved forward and mounted their own heavily shielded vehicles. The radio crackled, crackled, hummed, crackled again, and then a voice came through as he heard the other engines come to life.

"Car one — ready!" came the voice.



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There was a pause, then, "Car three — ready!" said a different voice.

Tanner lifted the microphone and mashed the button on its side.

"Car two ready," he said.

"Move out," came the order, and they headed up the ramp.

The door rolled upward before them, and they entered the storm.

IV

It was nightmare, getting out of L.A. and onto Route 91. The waters came down in sheets and rocks the size of baseballs banged against the armor plating of his car. Tanner smoked and turned on the special lights. He wore infrared goggles, and the night and the storm stalked him.

The radio crackled, many times, and it seemed that he heard the murmur of a distant voice, but he could never quite make out what it was trying to say.

They followed the road for as far as it went, and as their big tires sighed over the rugged terrain that began where the road ended, Tanner took the lead and the others were content to follow. He knew the way; they didn't.

He followed the old smugglers' route he'd used to run candy to the Mormons. It was possible that he was the only one left alive that knew it. Possible, but then there was always someone looking for a fast buck. So, in all of L.A., there might be somebody else.

The lightning began to fall, not in bolts, but sheets. The car was insulated, but after a time his hair stood on end. He might have seen a giant Gila Monster once, but he couldn't be sure. He kept his fingers away from the fire-control board. He'd save his teeth till menaces were imminent. From the rearview scanners it seemed that one of the cars behind him had discharged a rocket, but he couldn't be sure, since he had lost all radio contact with them immediately upon leaving the building.

Waters rushed toward him, splashed about his car. The sky sounded like an artillery range. A boulder the size of a tombstone fell in front of him, and he swerved about it. Red lights flashed across the sky from north to south. In their passing, he detected many black bands going from west to east. It was not an encouraging spectacle. The storm could go on for days.

He continued to move forward, skirting a pocket of radiation that had not died in the four years since last he had come this way.

They came upon a place where the sands were fused into a glas-

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sy sea, and he slowed as he began its passage, peering ahead after the craters and chasms it contained.

Three more rockfalls assailed him before the heavens split themselves open and revealed a bright blue light, edged with violet. The dark curtains rolled back toward the Poles, and the roaring and the gunfire reports diminished. A lavender glow remained in the north, and a green sun dipped toward the horizon.

They had ridden it out. He killed the infras, pushed back his goggles and switched on the normal night lamps.

The desert would be bad enough, all by itself.

Something big and bat-like swooped through the tunnel of his lights and was gone. He ignored its passage. Five minutes later it made a second pass, this time much closer, and he fired a magnesium flare. A black shape, perhaps forty feet across, was illuminated, and he gave it two five-second bursts from the fifty-calibers and it fell to the ground and did not return again.

To the squares, this was Damnation Alley. To Hell Tanner, this was still the parking lot. He'd been this way thirty-two times, and so far as he was concerned the Alley started in the place that was once called Colorado.

He led, and they followed, and the night wore on like an abrasive.

No airplane could make it. Not since the war. None could venture above a couple hundred feet, the place where the winds began. The winds. The mighty winds that circled the globe, tearing off the tops of mountains, Sequoia trees, wrecked buildings, gathering up birds, bats, insects and anything else that moved, up into the dead belt; the winds that swirled about the world, lacing the skies with dark lines of debris, occasionally meeting, merging, clashing, dropping tons of carnage wherever they came together and formed too great a mass. Air transportation was definitely out, to anywhere in the world. For these winds circled, and they never ceased. Not in all the twenty-five years of Tanner's memory had they let up.

Tanner pushed ahead, cutting a diagonal by the green sunset. Dust continued to fall about him, great clouds of it, and the sky was violet, then purple once more. Then the sun went down and the night came on, and the stars were very faint points of light somewhere above it all. After a time, the moon rose, and the half-face that it showed that night was the color of a glass of chianti wine held before a candle.

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He lit another cigarette and began to curse, slowly, softly and without emotion.

They threaded their way amid heaps of rubble: rock, metal, fragments of machinery, the prow of a boat. A snake, as big around as a garbage can and dark green in the cast light, slithered across Tanner's path, and he braked the vehicle as it continued and continued and continued. Perhaps a hundred and twenty feet of snake passed by before Tanner removed his foot from the brake and touched gently upon the gas pedal once again.

Glancing at the left-hand screen, which held an infrared version of the view to the left, it seemed that he saw two eyes glowing within the shadow of a heap of girders and masonry. Tanner kept one hand near the fire-control button and did not move it for a distance of several miles.

There were no windows in the vehicle, only screens which reflected views in every direction including straight up and the ground beneath the car. Tanner sat within an illuminated box which shielded him against radiation. The "car" that he drove had eight heavily treaded tires and was thirty-two feet in length. It mounted eight fifty-caliber automatic guns and four grenade throwers. It carried thirty armor-piercing rockets which could be discharged straight ahead or at any elevation up to forty degrees from the plane. Each of the four sides, as well as the roof of the vehicle, housed a flame thrower. Razor-sharp "wings" of tempered steel — eighteen inches wide at their bases and tapering to points, an inch and a quarter thick where they ridged — could be moved through a complete hundred-eighty-degree arc along the sides of the car and parallel to the ground, at a height of two feet and eight inches. When standing at a right angle to the body of the vehicle — eight feet to the rear of the front bumper — they extended out to a distance of six feet on either side of the car. They could be couched like lances for a charge. They could be held but slightly out from the sides for purposes of slashing whatever was sideswiped. The car was bullet-proof, air-conditioned and had its own food locker and sanitation facilities. A long-barreled .357 Magnum was held by a clip on the door near the driver's left hand. A 30.06, a .45 caliber automatic and six hand grenades occupied the rack immediately above the front seat.

But Tanner kept his own counsel, in the form of a long, slim SS dagger inside his right boot.

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He removed his gloves and wiped his palms on the knees of his denims. The pierced heart that was tattooed on the back of his right hand was red in the light from the dashboard. The knife that went through it was dark blue, and his first name was tattooed in the same color beneath it, one letter on each knuckle, beginning with that at the base of his little finger.

He opened and explored the two near compartments but could find no cigars. So he crushed out his cigarette butt on the floor and lit another.

The forward screen showed vegetation, and he slowed. He tried using the radio but couldn't tell whether anyone heard him, receiving only static in reply.

He slowed, staring ahead and up. He halted once again.

He turned his forward lights up to full intensity and studied the situation.

A heavy wall of thorn bushes stood before him, reaching to a height of perhaps twelve feet. It swept on to his right and off to his left, vanishing out of sight in both directions. How dense, how deep a pit might be, he could not tell. It had not been there a few years before.

He moved forward slowly and activated the flame throwers. In the rearview screen, he could see that the other vehicles had halted a hundred yards behind him and dimmed their lights.

He drove till he could go no further, then pressed the button for the forward flame.

It shot forth, a tongue of fire, licking fifty feet into the bramble. He held it for five seconds and withdrew it. Then he extended it a second time and backed away quickly as the flames caught.

Beginning with a tiny glow, they worked their way upward and spread slowly to the right and the left. Then they grew in size and brightness.

As Tanner backed away, he had to dim his screen, for they'd spread fifty feet before he'd backed more than a hundred, and they leapt thirty and forty feet into the air.

The blaze widened, to a hundred feet, two, three . . . . As Tanner backed away, he could see a river of fire flowing off into the distance, and the night was bright about him.

He watched it burn, until it seemed that he looked upon a molten sea. Then he searched the refrigerator, but there was no beer. He opened a soft drink and sipped it while he watched the burning. After about ten minutes, the air conditioner whined and shook itself to life. Hordes of dark, four-footed creatures, the size of rats or cats, fled from the

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inferno, their coats smouldering. They flowed by. At one point, they covered his forward screen, and he could hear the scratching of their claws upon the fenders and the roof.

He switched off the lights and killed the engine, tossed the empty can into the waste box. He pushed the "Recline" button on the side of the seat, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

V

He was awakened by the blowing of horns. It was still night, and the panel clock showed him that he had slept for a little over three hours.

He stretched, sat up, adjusted the seat. The other cars had moved up, and one stood to either side of him. He leaned on his own horn twice and started his engine. He switched on the forward lights and considered the prospect before him as he drew on his gloves.

Smoke still rose from the blackened field, and far off to his right there was a glow, as if the fire still continued somewhere in the distance. They were in the place that had once been known as Nevada.

He rubbed his eyes and scratched his nose, then blew the horn once and engaged the gears.

He moved forward slowly. The burnt-out area seemed fairly level and his tires were thick.

He entered the black field, and his screens were immediately obscured by the rush of ashes and smoke which arose on all sides.

He continued, hearing the tires crunching through the brittle remains. He set his screens at maximum and switched his headlamps up to full brightness.

The vehicles that flanked him dropped back perhaps eighty feet, and he dimmed the screens that reflected the glare of their lights.

He released a flare, and as it hung there, burning, cold, white and high, he saw a charred plain that swept on to the edges of his eyes' horizon.

He pushed down on the accelerator, and the cars behind him swung far out to the sides to avoid the clouds that he raised. His radio crackled, and he heard a faint voice but could not make out its words.

He blew his horn and rolled ahead even faster. The other vehicles kept pace.

He drove for an hour and a half before he saw the end of the ash and the beginning of clean sand up ahead.

Within five minutes, he was moving across desert once more, and he checked his compass and bore slightly to the west. Cars one and three followed, speeding

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up to match his new pace, and he drove with one hand and ate a corned beef sandwich.

When morning came, many hours later, he took a pill to keep himself alert and listened to the screaming of the wind. The sun rose up like molten silver to his right, and a third of the sky grew amber and was laced with fine lines like cobwebs. The desert was topaz beneath it, and the brown curtain of dust that hung continuously at his back, pierced only by the eight shafts of the other cars' lights, took on a pinkish tone as the sun grew a bright red corona and the shadows fled into the west. He dimmed his lights as he passed an orange cactus shaped like a toadstool and perhaps fifty feet in diameter.

Giant bats fled south, and far ahead he saw a wide waterfall descending from the heavens. It was gone by the time he reached the damp sand of that place, but a dead shark lay to his left, and there was seaweed, seaweed, seaweed, fishes, driftwood all about.

The sky pinked over from east to west and remained that color. He gulped a bottle of ice water and felt it go into his stomach. He passed more cacti, and a pair of coyotes sat at the base of one and watched him drive by. They seemed to be laughing. Their tongues were very red.

As the sun brightened, he dimmed the screen. He smoked, and he found a button that produced music. He swore at the soft, stringy sounds that filled the cabin, but he didn't turn them off.

He checked the radiation level outside, and it was only a little above normal. The last time he had passed this way, it had been considerably higher.

He passed several wrecked vehicles such as his own. He ran across another plain of silicon, and in the middle was a huge crater which he skirted. The pinkness in the sky faded and faded and faded, and a bluish tone came to replace it. The dark lines were still there, and occasionally one widened into a black river as it flowed away into the east. At noon, one such river partly eclipsed the sun for a period of eleven minutes. With its departure, there came a brief dust storm, and Tanner turned on the radar and his lights. He knew there was a chasm somewhere ahead, and when he came to it he bore to the left and ran along its edge for close to two miles before it narrowed and vanished. The other vehicles followed, and Tanner took his bearings from the compass once more. The dust had subsided with the brief wind, and even with the screen dimmed Tanner had to don his

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dark goggles against the glare of reflected sunlight from the faceted field he now negotiated.

He passed towering formations which seemed to be quartz. He had never stopped to investigate them in the past, and he had no desire to do it now. The spectrum danced at their bases, and patches of such light occurred for some distance about them.

Speeding away from the crater, he came again upon sand, clean, brown, white dun and red. There were more cacti, and huge dunes lay all about him. The sky continued to change, until finally it was as blue as a baby's eyes. Tanner hummed along with the music for a time, and then he saw the Monster.

It was a Gila, bigger than his car, and it moved in fast. It sprang from out the sheltering shade of a valley filled with cacti and it raced toward him, its beaded body bright with many colors beneath the sun, its dark, dark eyes unblinking as it bounded forward on its lizard-fast legs, sable fountains rising behind its upheld tail that was wide as a sail and pointed like a tent.

He couldn't use the rockets because it was coming in from the side.

He opened up with his fifty-calibers and spread his "wings" and stamped the accelerator to the floor. As it neared, he sent forth a cloud of fire in its direction. By then, the other cars were firing, too.

It swung its tail and opened and closed its jaws, and its blood came forth and fell upon the ground. Then a rocket struck it. It turned; it leaped.

There came a booming, crunching sound as it fell upon the vehicle identified as car number one and lay there.

Tanner hit the brakes, turned, and headed back.

Car number three came up beside it and parked. Tanner did the same.

He jumped down from the cab and crossed to the smashed car. He had the rifle in his hands and he put six rounds into the creature's head before he approached the car.

The door had come open, and it hung from a single hinge, the bottom one.

Inside, Tanner could see the two men sprawled, and there was some blood upon the dashboard and the seat.

The other two drivers came up beside him and stared within. Then the shorter of the two crawled inside and listened for the heartbeat and the pulse and felt for breathing.

"Mike's dead," he called out, "but Greg's starting to come around."

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A wet spot that began at the car's rear and spread and continued to spread, and the smell of gasoline filled the air.

Tanner took out a cigarette, thought better of it and replaced it in the pack. He could hear the gurgle of the huge gas tanks as they emptied themselves upon the ground.

The man who stood at Tanner's side said, "I never saw anything like it . . . . I've seen pictures, but — I never saw anything like it . . . ."

"I have," said Tanner, and then the other driver emerged from the wreck, partly supporting the man he'd referred to as Greg.

The man called out, "Greg's all right. He just hit his head on the dash."

The man who stood at Tanner's side said, "You can take him, Hell. He can back you up when he's feeling better," and Tanner shrugged and turned his back on the scene and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think you should do — " the man began, and Tanner blew smoke in his face. He turned to regard the two approaching men and saw that Greg was dark-eyed and deeply tanned. Part Indian, possibly. His skin seemed smooth, save for a couple pockmarks beneath his right eye, and his cheekbones were high and his hair very dark. He was as big as Tanner, which was six-two, though not quite so heavy. He was dressed in overalls; and his carriage, now that he had had a few deep breaths of air, became very erect, and he moved with a quick, graceful stride.

"We'll have to bury Mike," the short man said.

"I hate to lose the time," said his companion, "but — " and then Tanner flipped his cigarette and threw himself to the ground as it landed in the pool at the rear of the car.

There was an explosion, flames, then more explosions. Tanner heard the rockets as they tore off toward the east, inscribing dark furrows in the hot afternoon's air. The ammo for the fifty-calibers exploded, and the hand grenades went off, and Tanner burrowed deeper and deeper into the sand, covering his head and blocking his ears.

As soon as things grew quiet, he grabbed for the rifle. But they were already coming at him, and he saw the muzzle of a pistol. He raised his hands slowly and stood.

"Why the goddamn hell did you do a stupid thing like that?" said the other driver, the man who held the pistol.

Tanner smiled, and, "Now we don't have to bury him," he said. "Cremation's just as good, and it's already over."

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"You could have killed us all, if those guns or those rocket launchers had been aimed this way!"

"They weren't. I looked."

"The flying metal could've — Oh . . . . I see. Pick up your damn rifle, buddy, and keep it pointed at the ground. Eject the rounds it's still got in it and put 'em in your pocket."

Tanner did this thing while the other talked.

"You wanted to kill us all, didn't you? Then you could have cut out and gone your way, like you tried to do yesterday. Isn't that right?"

"You said it, mister, not me."

"It's true, though. You don't give a good goddamn if everybody in Boston croaks, do you?"

"My gun's unloaded now," said Tanner.

"Then get back in your bloody buggy and get going! I'll be behind you all the way!"

Tanner walked back toward his car. He heard the others arguing behind him, but he didn't think they'd shoot him. As he was about to climb up into the cab, he saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye and turned quickly.

The man named Greg was standing behind him, tall and quiet as a ghost.

"Want me to drive awhile?" he asked Tanner, without expression.

"No, you rest up. I'm still in good shape. Later on this afternoon, maybe, if you feel up to it."

The man nodded and rounded the cab. He entered from the other side and immediately reclined his chair.

Tanner slammed his door and started the engine. He heard the air conditioner come to life.

"Want to reload this?" he asked. "And put it back on the rack?" And he handed the rifle and the ammo to the other, who had nodded. He drew on his gloves then and said, "There's plenty of soft drinks in the 'frig. Nothing much else, though," and the other nodded again. Then he heard car three start and said, "Might as well roll," and he put it into gear and took his foot off the clutch.

VI

After they had driven for about half an hour, the man called Greg said to him, "Is it true what Marlowe said?"

"What's a Marlowe?"

"He's driving the other car. Were you trying to kill us? Do you really want to skip out?"

Hell laughed, then, "That's right," he said. "You named it."

"Why?"

Hell let it hang there for a minute, then said, "Why

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shouldn't I? I'm not anxious to die. I'd like to wait a long time before I try that bit."

Greg said, "If we don't make it, the population of the continent may be cut in half."

"If it's a question of them or me, I'd rather it was them."

"I sometimes wonder how people like you happen."

"The same way as anybody else, mister, and it's fun for a couple people for awhile, and then the trouble starts."

"What did they ever do to you, Hell?"

"Nothing. What did they ever do *for* me? Nothing. Nothing. What do I owe them? The same."

"Why'd you stomp your brother back at the Hall?"

"Because I didn't want him doing a damfool thing like this and getting himself killed. Cracked ribs he can get over. Death is a more permanent ailment."

"That's not what I asked you. I mean, what do you care whether he croaks?"

"He's a good kid, that's why. He's got a thing for this chick, though, and he can't see straight."

"So what's it to you?"

"Like I said, he's my brother and he's a good kid. I like him."

"How come?"

"Oh, hell! We've been through a lot together, that's all! What are you trying to do? Psychoanalyze me?"

"I was just curious, that's all."

"So now you know. Talk about something else if you want to talk, okay?"

"Okay. You've been this way before, right?"

"That's right."

"You been any further east?"

"I've been all the way to the Missus Hip."

"Do you know a way to get across it?"

"I think so. The bridge is still up at Saint Louis."

"Why didn't you go across it the last time you were there?"

"Are you kidding? The thing's packed with cars full of bones. It wasn't worth the trouble to try and clear it."

"Why'd you go that far in the first place?"

"Just to see what it was like. I heard all these stories — "

"What was it like?"

"A lot of crap. Burnt down towns, big craters, crazy animals, some people — "

"People? People still live there?"

"If you want to call them that. They're all wild and screwed up. They wear rags or animal skins or they go naked. They threw rocks at me till I shot a couple. Then they let me alone."

"How long ago was that?"

"Six — maybe seven years ago. I was just a kid then."

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"How come you never told anybody about it?"

"I did. A coupla my friends. Nobody else ever asked me. We were going to go out there and grab off a couple of the girls and bring them back, but everybody chickened out."

"What would you have done with them?"

Tanner shrugged. "I dunno. Sell 'em, I guess."

"You guys used to do that, down on the Barbary Coast — sell people, I mean — didn't you?"

Tanner shrugged again.

"Used to," he said, "before the Big Raid."

"How'd you manage to live through that? I thought they'd cleaned the whole place out?"

"I was doing time," he said. "A.D.W."

"What's that?"

"Assault with a deadly weapon."

"What'd you do after they let you go?"

"I let them rehabilitate me. They got me a job running the mail."

"Oh yeah, I heard about that. Didn't realize it was you, though. You were supposed to be pretty good — doing all right and ready for a promotion. Then you kicked your boss around and lost your job. How come?"

"He was always riding me about my record and about my old gang down on the Coast. Finally, one day I told him to lay off, and he laughed at me, so I hit him with a chain. Knocked out the bastard's front teeth. I'd do it again."

"Too bad."

"I was the best driver he had. It was his loss. Nobody else will make the Albuquerque run, not even today. Not unless they really need the money."

"Did you like the work, though, while you were doing it?"

"Yeah, I like to drive."

"You should probably have asked for a transfer when the guy started bugging you."

"I know. If it was happening today, that's probably what I'd do. I was mad, though, and I used to get mad a lot faster than I do now. I think I'm smarter these days than I was before."

"If you make it on this run and you go home afterwards, you'll probably be able to get your job back. Think you'd take it?"

"In the first place," said Tanner, "I don't think we'll make it. And in the second, if we do make it and there's still people around that town, I think I'd rather stay there than go back."

Greg nodded. "'Might be smart. You'd be a hero. Nobody'd know much about your

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record. Somebody'd turn you on to something good."

"The hell with heroes," said Tanner.

"Me, though, I'll go back if we make it."

"Sail 'round Cape Horn?"

"That's right."

"Might be fun. But why go back?"

"I've got an old mother and a mess of brothers and sisters I take care of, and I've got a girl back there."

Tanner brightened the screen as the sky began to darken.

"What's your mother like?"

"Nice old lady. Raised the eight of us. Got arthritis bad now, though."

"What was she like when you were a kid?"

"She used to work during the day, but she cooked our meals and sometimes brought us candy. She made a lot of our clothes. She used to tell us stories, like about how things were before the war. She played games with us and sometimes she gave us toys."

"How about your old man?" Tanner asked him, after awhile.

"He drank pretty heavy and he had a lot of jobs, but he never beat us too much. He was all right. He got run over by a car when I was around twelve."

"And you take care of everybody now?"

"Yeah. I'm the oldest."

"What is it that you do?"

"I've got your old job. I run the mail to Albuquerque."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"I'll be damned! Is Gorman still the supervisor?"

"He retired last year, on disability."

"I'll be damned! That's funny. Listen, down in Albuquerque do you ever go to a bar called Pedro's?"

"I've been there."

"Have they still got a little blonde girl plays the piano? Named Margaret?"

"No."

"Oh."

"They've got some guy now. Fat fellow. Wears a big ring on his left hand."

Tanner nodded and downshifted as he began the ascent of a steep hill.

"How's your head now?" he asked, when they'd reached the top and started down the opposite slope.

"Feels pretty good. I took a couple of your aspirins with that soda I had."

"Feel up to driving for awhile?"

"Sure, I could do that."

"Okay, then." Tanner leaned on the horn and braked the car. "Just follow the compass for a hundred miles or so and wake me up. All right?"

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"Okay. Anything special I should watch out for?"

"The snakes. You'll probably see a few. Don't hit them, whatever you do."

"Right."

They changed seats, and Tanner reclined the one, lit a cigarette, smoked half of it, crushed it out and went to sleep.

VII

When Greg awakened him, it was night. Tanner coughed and drank a mouthful of ice water and crawled back to the latrine. When he emerged, he took the driver's seat and checked the mileage and looked at the compass. He corrected their course and, "We'll be in Salt Lake City before morning," he said, "if we're lucky. — Did you run into any trouble?"

"No, it was pretty easy. I saw some snakes and I let them go by. That was about it."

Tanner grunted and engaged the gears.

"What was that guy's name that brought the news about the plague?" Tanner asked.

"Brady or Brody or something like that," said Greg.

"What was it that killed him? He might have brought the plague to L.A., you know."

Greg shook his head.

"No. His car had been damaged, and he was all broken up — and he'd been exposed to radiation a lot of the way. They burnt his body and his car, and anybody who'd been anywhere near him got shots of Haffikine."

"What's that?"

"That's the stuff we're carrying — Haffikine antiserum. It's the only cure for the plague. Since we had a bout of it around twenty years ago, we've kept it on hand and maintained the facilities for making more in a hurry. Boston never did, and now they're hurting."

"Seems kind of silly for the only other nation on the continent — maybe in the world — not to take better care of itself, when they knew we'd had a dose of it."

Greg shrugged.

"Probably, but there it is. Did they give you any shots before they released you?"

"Yeah."

"That's what it was, then."

"I wonder where their driver crossed the Missus Hip? He didn't say, did he?"

"He hardly said anything at all. They got most of the story from the letter he carried."

"Must have been one hell of a driver, to run the Alley."

"Yeah. Nobody's ever done it before, have they?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'd like to have met the guy."

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"Me too, at least I guess."

"It's a shame we can't radio across country, like in the old days."

"Why?"

"Then he wouldn't of had to do it, and we could find out along the way whether it's really worth making the run. They might all be dead by now, you know."

"You've got a point there, mister, and in a day or so we'll be to a place where going back will be harder than going ahead."

Tanner adjusted the screen as dark shapes passed.

"Look at that, will you!"

"I don't see anything."

"Put on your infras."

Greg did this and stared upward at the screen.

Bats. Enormous bats cavorted overhead, swept by in dark clouds.

"There must be hundreds of them, maybe thousands . . . ."

"Guess so. Seems there are more than there used to be when I came this way a few years back. They must be screwing their heads off in Carlsbad."

"We never see them in L.A. Maybe they're pretty much harmless."

"Last time I was up to Salt Lake, I heard talk that a lot of them were rabid. Some day someone's got to go — them or us."

"You're a cheerful guy to ride with, you know?"

Tanner chuckled and lit a cigarette, and, "Why don't you make us some coffee?" he said. "As for the bats, that's something our kids can worry about, if there are any."

Greg filled the coffee pot and plugged it into the dashboard. After a time, it began to grumble and hiss.

"What the hell's that?" said Tanner, and he hit the brakes. The other car halted, several hundred yards behind his own, and he turned on his microphone and said, "Car three! What's that look like to you?" and waited.

He watched them: towering, tapered tops that spun between the ground and the sky, wobbling from side to side, sweeping back and forth, about a mile ahead. It seemed there were fourteen or fifteen of the things. Now they stood like pillars, now they danced. They bored into the ground and sucked up yellow dust. There was a haze all about them. The stars were dim or absent above or behind them.

Greg stared ahead and said, "I've heard of whirlwinds, tornadoes — big, spinning things. I've never seen one, but that's the way they were described to me."

And then the radio crackled, and the muffled voice of the man called Marlowe came through:

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"Giant dust devils," he said. "Big, rotary sand storms. I think they're sucking stuff up into the dead belt, because I don't see anything coming down — "

"You ever see one before?"

"No, but my partner says he did. He says the best thing might be to shoot our anchoring columns and stay put."

Tanner did not answer immediately. He stared ahead, and the tornadoes seemed to grow larger.

"They're coming this way," he finally said. "I'm not about to park here and be a target. I want to be able to maneuver. I'm going ahead through them."

"I don't think you should."

"Nobody asked you, mister, but if you've got any brains you'll do the same thing."

"I've got rockets aimed at your tail, Hell."

"You won't fire them — not for a thing like this, where I could be right and you could be wrong — and not with Greg in here, too."

There was silence within the static, then, "Okay, you win, Hell. Go ahead, and we'll watch. If you make it, we'll follow. If you don't, we'll stay put."

"I'll shoot a flare when I get to the other side," Tanner said. "When you see it, you do the same. Okay?"

Tanner broke the connection and looked ahead, studying the great black columns, swollen at their tops. There fell a few layers of light from the storm which they supported, and the air was foggy between the blacknesses of their revolving trunks. "Here goes," said Tanner, switching his lights as bright as they would beam. "Strap yourself in, boy," and Greg obeyed him as the vehicle crunched forward.

Tanner buckled his own safety belt as they slowly edged ahead.

The columns grew and swayed as he advanced, and he could now hear a rushing, singing sound, as of a chorus of the winds.

He skirted the first by three hundred yards and continued to the left to avoid the one which stood before him and grew and grew. As he got by it, there was another, and he moved further to the left. Then there was an open area of perhaps a quarter of a mile leading ahead and toward his right.

He swiftly sped across it and passed between two of the towers that stood like ebony pillars a hundred yards apart. As he passed them, the wheel was almost torn from his grip, and he seemed to inhabit the center of an eternal thunderclap. He swerved to the right then and skirted another, speeding.

Then he saw seven more and

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cut between two and passed about another. As he did, the one behind him moved rapidly, crossing the path he had just taken. He exhaled heavily and turned to the left.

He was surrounded by the final four, and he braked so that he was thrown forward and the straps cut into his shoulder, as two of the whirlwinds shook violently and moved in terrible spurts of speed. One passed before him, and the front end of his car was raised from off the ground.

Then he floored the gas pedal and shot between the final two, and they were all behind him.

He continued on for about a quarter for a mile, turned the car about, mounted a small rise and parked.

He relased the flare.

It hovered, like a dying star, for about half a minute.

He lit a cigarette as he stared back, and he waited.

He finished the cigarette.

Then, "Nothing," he said. "Maybe they couldn't spot it through the storm. Or maybe we couldn't see theirs."

"I hope so," said Greg.

"How long do you want to wait?"

"Let's have that coffee."

An hour passed, then two. The pillars began to collapse until there were only three of the slimmer ones. They moved off toward the east and were gone from sight.

Tanner released another flare, and still there was no response.

"We'd better go back and look for them," said Greg.

"Okay."

And they did.

There was nothing there, though, nothing to indicate the fate of car three.

Dawn occurred in the east before they had finished with their searching, and Tanner turned the car around, checked the compass, and moved north.

"When do you think we'll hit Salt Lake?" Greg asked him, after a long silence.

"Maybe two hours."

"Were you scared, back when you ran those things?"

"No. Afterwards, though, I didn't feel so good."

Greg nodded.

"You want me to drive again?"

"No. I won't be able to sleep if I stop now. We'll take in more gas in Salt Lake, and we can get something to eat while a mechanic checks over the car. Then I'll put us on the right road, and you can take over while I sack out."

The sky was purple again and the black bands had widened. Tanner cursed and drove faster. He fired his ventral flame at two bats who decided to survey the

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car. They fell back, and he accepted the mug of coffee Greg offered him.

VIII

The sky was as dark as evening when they pulled into Salt Lake City. John Brady — that was his name — had passed that way but days before, and the city was ready for the responding vehicle. Most of its ten thousand inhabitants appeared along the street, and before Hell and Greg had jumped down from the cab after pulling into the first garage they saw, the hood of car number two was opened and three mechanics were peering at the engine.

They abandoned the idea of eating in the little diner across the street. Too many people hit them with too many questions as soon as they set foot outside the garage. They retreated and sent someone after eggs, bacon and toast.

There was cheering as they rolled forth onto the street and sped away into the east.

"Could have used a beer," said Tanner. "Damn it!"

And they rushed along beside the remains of what had once been U.S. Route 40.

Tanner relinquished the driver's seat and stretched out on the passenger side of the cab. The sky continued to darken above them, taking upon it the appearance it had had in L.A. the day before.

"Maybe we can outrun it," Greg said.

"Hope so."

The blue pulse began in the north, flared into a brilliant aurora. The sky was almost black directly overhead.

"Run!" cried Tanner. "Run! Those are hills up ahead! Maybe we can find an overhang or a cave!"

But it broke upon them before they reached the hills. First came the hail, then the flak. The big stones followed, and the scanner on the right went dead. The sands blasted them, and they rode beneath a celestial waterfall that caused the engine to sputter and cough.

They reached the shelter of the hills, though, and found a place within a rocky valley where the walls jutted steeply forward and broke the main force of the wind/sand/dust/rock/water storm. They sat there as the winds screamed and boomed about them. They smoked and they listened.

"We won't make it," said Greg. "You were right. I thought we had a chance. We don't. Everything's against us, even the weather."

"We've got a chance," said

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Tanner. "Maybe not a real good one. But we've been lucky so far. Remember that."

Greg spat into the waste container.

"Why the sudden optimism? From you?"

"I was mad before and shooting off my mouth. Well, I'm still mad — but I got me a feeling now: I feel lucky. That's all."

Greg laughed. "The hell with luck. Look out there," he said.

"I see it," said Tanner. "This buggy is built to take it, and it's doing it. Also, we're only getting about ten per cent of its full strength."

"Okay, but what difference does it make? It could last for a couple days."

"So we wait it out."

"Wait too long, and even that ten per cent can smash us. Wait too long, and even if it doesn't there'll be no reason left to go ahead. Try driving, though, and it'll flatten us."

"It'll take me ten or fifteen minutes to finish that scanner. We've got spare 'eyes.' If the storm lasts more than six hours, we'll start out anyway."

"Says who?"

"Me."

"Why? You're the one who was so hot on saving his own neck. How come all of a sudden you're willing to risk it, not to mention mine too?"

Tanner smoked awhile, then said, "I've been thinking," and then he didn't say anything else.

"About what?" Greg asked him.

"Those folks in Boston," Tanner said. "Maybe it is worth it. I don't know. They never did anything for me. But hell, I like action and I'd hate to see the whole world get dead. I think I'd like to see Boston, too, just to see what it's like. It might even be fun being a hero, just to see what that's like. Don't get me wrong. I don't give a damn about anybody up there. It's just that I don't like the idea of everything being like the Alley here — all burnt-out and screwed up and full of crap. When we lost the other car back in those tornadoes, it made me start thinking . . . . I'd hate to see everybody go that way — everything. I might still cop out if I get a real good chance, but I'm just telling you how I feel now. That's all."

Greg looked away and laughed, a little more heartily than usual.

"I never suspected you contained such philosophic depths."

"Me neither. I'm tired. Tell me about your brothers and sisters, huh?"

"Okay."

Four hours later when the storm slackened and the rocks became dust and the rain fog, Tanner replaced the right scan-

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ner; and they moved on out, passing later through Rocky Mountain National Park. The dust and the fog combined to limit visibility throughout the day. That evening they skirted the ruin that was Denver, and Tanner took over as they headed toward the place that had once been called Kansas.

He drove all night, and in the morning the sky was clearer than it had been in days. He let Greg snore on and sorted through his thoughts while he sipped his coffee.

It was a strange feeling that came over him as he sat there with his pardon in his pocket and his hands upon the wheel. The dust fumed at his back. The sky was the color of rosebuds, and the dark trails had shrunken once again. He recalled the stories of the days when the missiles came down, burning everything but the northeast and the southwest; the day when the winds arose and the clouds vanished and the sky had lost its blue; the days when the Panama Canal had been shattered and radios had ceased to function; the days when the planes could no longer fly. He regretted this, for he had always wanted to fly, high, birdlike, swooping and soaring. He felt slightly cold, and the screens now seemed to possess a crystal clarity, like pools of tinted water. Somewhere ahead, far, far ahead lay what might be the only other sizeable pocket of humanity that remained on the shoulders of the world. He might be able to save it, if he could reach it in time. He looked about him at the rocks and the sand and the side of a broken garage that had somehow come to occupy the slope of a mountain. It remained within his mind long after he had passed it. Shattered, fallen down, half covered with debris, it took on a stark and monstrous form, like a decaying skull which had once occupied the shoulders of a giant; and he pressed down hard on the accelerator, although it could go no further. He began to tremble. The sky brightened, but he did not touch the screen controls. Why did he have to be the one? He saw a mass of smoke ahead and to the right. As he drew nearer, he saw that it rose from a mountain which had lost its top and now held a nest of fires in its place. He cut to the left, going miles, many miles, out of the way he had intended. Occasionally, the ground shook beneath his wheels. Ashes fell about him, but now the smouldering cone was far to the rear of the right-hand screen. He wondered after the days that had gone before and the few things that he actually knew about them.

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If he made it through, he decided he'd learn more about history. He threaded his way through painted canyons and forded a shallow river. Nobody had ever asked him to do anything important before, and he hoped that nobody ever would again. Now, though, he was taken by the feeling that he could do it. He wanted to do it. Damnation Alley lay all about him, burning, fuming, shaking, and if he could not run it then half the world would die, and the chances would be doubled that one day all the world would be part of the Alley. His tattoo stood stark on his whitened knuckles, saying "Hell," and he knew that it was true. Greg still slept, the sleep of exhaustion, and Tanner narrowed his eyes and chewed his beard and never touched the brake, not even when he saw the rockslide beginning. He made it by and sighed. That pass was closed to him forever, but he had shot through without a scratch. His mind was an expanding bubble, its surfaces like the viewscreens, registering everything about him. He felt the flow of the air within the cab and the upward pressure of the pedal upon his foot. His throat seemed dry, but it didn't matter. His eyes felt gooey at their inside corners, but he didn't wipe them. He roared across the pocked plains of Kansas, and he knew now that he had been sucked into the role completely and that he wanted it that way. Damn-his-eyes Denton had been right. It had to be done. He halted when he came to the lip of a chasm and headed north. Thirty miles later it ended, and he turned again to the south. Greg muttered in his sleep. It sounded like a curse. Tanner repeated it softly a couple times and turned toward the east as soon as a level stretch occurred. The sun stood in high heaven, and Tanner felt as though he were drifting bodiless beneath it, above the brown ground flaked with green spikes of growth. He clenched his teeth and his mind went back to Denny, doubtless now in a hospital. Better than being where the others had gone. He hoped the money he'd told him about was still there. Then he felt the ache begin, in the places between his neck and his shoulders. It spread down into his arms, and he realized how tightly he was gripping the wheel. He blinked and took a deep breath and realized that his eyeballs hurt. He lit a cigarette and it tasted foul, but he kept puffing at it. He drank some water and he dimmed the rear view-screen as the sun fell behind him. Then he heard a sound like a distant rumble of thunder and was fully alert once more. He sat up

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straight and took his foot off the accelerator.

He slowed. He braked and stopped. Then he saw them. He sat there and watched them as they passed, about a half-mile ahead.

A monstrous herd of bison crossed before him. It took the better part of an hour before they had passed. Huge, heavy, dark, heads down, hooves scoring the soil, they ran without slowing until the thunder was great and then rolled off toward the north, diminishing, softening, dying, gone. The screen of their dust still hung before him, and he plunged into it, turning on his lights.

He considered taking a pill, decided against it. Greg might be waking soon, he wanted to be able to get some sleep after they'd switched over.

He came up beside a highway, and its surface looked pretty good, so he crossed onto it and sped ahead. After a time, he passed a faded, sagging sign that said "TOPEKA — 110 MILES."

Greg yawned and stretched. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and then rubbed his forehead, the right side of which was swollen and dark.

"What time is it?" he asked.

Tanner gestured toward the clock in the dashboard.

"Morning or is it afternoon?"

"Afternoon."

"My God! I must have slept around fifteen hours!"

"That's about right."

"You been driving all that time?"

"That's right."

"You must be done in. You look like hell. Let me just hit the head. I'll take over in a few minutes."

"Good idea."

Greg crawled toward the rear of the vehicle.

After about five minutes, Tanner came upon the outskirts of a dead town. He drove up the main street, and there were rusted-out hulks of cars all along it. Most of the building had fallen in upon themselves, and some of the opened cellars that he saw were filled with scummy water. Skeletons lay about the town square. There were no trees standing above the weeds that grew there. Three telephone poles still stood, one of them leaning forward and trailing wires like a handful of black spaghetti. Several benches were visible within the weeds beside the cracked sidewalks, and a skeleton lay stretched out upon the second one Tanner passed. He found his way barred by a fallen telephone pole, and he detoured around the block. The next street was somewhat better preserved, but all its store-

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front windows were broken, and a nude mannikin posed fetchingly with her left arm missing from the elbow down. The traffic light at the corner stared blindly as Tanner passed through its intersection.

Tanner heard Greg coming forward as he turned at the next corner.

"I'll take over now," he said.

"I want to get out of this place first," and they both watched in silence for the next fifteen minutes until the dead town was gone from around them.

Tanner pulled to a halt then and said, "We're a couple hours away from a place that used to be called Topeka. Wake me if you run into anything hairy."

"How did it go while I was asleep? Did you have any trouble?"

"No," said Tanner, and he closed his eyes and began to snore.

Greg drove away from the sunset, and he ate three ham sandwiches and drank a quart of milk before Topeka.

IX

Tanner was awakened by the firing of the rockets. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stared dumbly ahead for almost half a minute.

Like gigantic dried leaves, great clouds fell about them. Bats, bats, bats. The air was filled with bats. Tanner could hear a chittering, squeaking, scratching sound, and the car was buffeted by their dark bodies.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Kansas City. The place seems full of them," and Greg released another rocket, which cut a fiery path through the swooping, spinning horde.

"Save the rockets. Use the fire," said Tanner, switching the nearest gun to manual and bringing cross-hairs into focus upon the screen. "Blast 'em in all directions — for five, six seconds — then I'll come in."

The flame shot forth, orange and cream blossoms of combustion. When they folded, Tanner sighted in the screen and squeezed the trigger. He swung the gun, and they fell. Their charred bodies lay all about him, and he added new ones to the smouldering heaps.

"Roll it!" he cried, and the car moved forward, swaying, bat-bodies crunching beneath its tires.

Tanner laced the heavens with gunfire, and when they swooped again he strafed them and fired a flare.

In the sudden magnesium glow from overhead, it seemed that millions of vampire-faced forms were circling, spiraling down toward them.

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He switched from gun to gun, and they fell about him like fruit. Then he called out, "Brake, and hit the topside flame!" and Greg did this thing.

"Now the sides! Front and rear next!"

Bodies were burning all about them, heaped as high as the hood, and Greg put the car into low gear when Tanner cried "Forward!" And they pushed their way through the wall of charred flesh.

Tanner fired another flare.

The bats were still there, but circling higher now. Tanner primed the guns and waited, but they did not attack again in any great number. A few swept about them, and he took pot-shots at them as they passed.

Ten minutes later he said, "That's the Missouri River to our left. If we just follow alongside it now, we'll hit Saint Louis."

"I know. Do you think it'll be full of bats, too?"

"Probably. But if we take our time and arrive with daylight, they shouldn't bother us. Then we can figure a way to get across the Missus Hip."

Then their eyes fell upon the rearview screen, where the dark skyline of Kansas City with bats was silhouetted by pale stars and touched by the light of the bloody moon.

After a time, Tanner slept once more. He dreamt he was riding his bike, slowly, down the center of a wide street, and people lined the sidewalks and began to cheer as he passed. They threw confetti, but by the time it reached him it was garbage, wet and stinking. He stepped on the gas then, but his bike slowed even more and now they were screaming at him. They shouted obscenities. They cried out his name, over and over, and again. The Harley began to wobble, but his feet seemed to be glued in place. In a moment, he knew, he would fall. The bike came to a halt then, and he began to topple over toward the right side. They rushed toward him as he fell, and he knew it was just about all over . . . .

He awoke with a jolt and saw the morning spread out before him: a bright coin in the middle of a dark blue tablecloth and a row of glasses along the edge.

"That's it," said Greg. "The Missus Hip."

Tanner was suddenly very hungry.

After they had refreshed themselves, they sought the bridge.

"I didn't see any of your naked people with spears," said Greg. "Of course, we might have passed their way after dark — if there are any of them still around."

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"Good thing, too," said Tanner. "Saved us some ammo."

The bridge came into view, sagging and dark save for the places where the sun gilded its cables, and it stretched unbroken across the bright expanse of waters. They moved slowly toward it, threading their way through streets gorged with rubble, detouring when it became completely blocked by the rows of broken machines, fallen walls, sewer-deep abysses in the burst pavement.

It took them two hours to travel half a mile, and it was noon before they reached the foot of the bridge, and, "It looks as if Brady might have crossed here," said Greg, eying what appeared to be a cleared passageway amidst the wrecks that filled the span. "How do you think he did it?"

"Maybe he had something with him to hoist them and swing them out over the edge. There are some wrecks below, down where the water is shallow."

"Were they there last time you passed by?"

"I don't know. I wasn't right down here by the bridge. I topped that hill back there," and he gestured at the rearview screen.

"Well, from here it looks like we might be able to make it. Let's roll."

They moved upward and forward onto the bridge and began their slow passage across the mighty Missus Hip. There were times when the bridge creaked beneath them, sighed, groaned, and they felt it move.

The sun began to climb, and still they moved forward, scraping their fenders against the edges of the wrecks, using their wings like plows. They were on the bridge for three hours before its end came into sight through a rift in the junkstacks.

When their wheels finally touched the opposite shore, Greg sat there breathing heavily and then lit a cigarette.

"You want to drive awhile, Hell?"

"Yeah. Let's switch over."

He did, and, "God! I'm bushed!" he said as he sprawled out.

Tanner drove forward through the ruins of East Saint Louis, hurrying to clear the town before nightfall. The radiation level began to mount as he advanced, and the streets were cluttered and broken. He checked the inside of the cab for radioactivity, but it was still clean.

It took him hours, and as the sun fell at his back he saw the blue aurora begin once more in the north. But the sky stayed clear, filled with its stars, and there were no black lines that he could see. After a long while, a

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rose-colored moon appeared and hung before him. He turned on the music, softly, and glanced at Greg. It didn't seem to bother him, so he let it continue.

The instrument panel caught his eye. The radiation level was still climbing. Then, in the forward screen, he saw the crater and he stopped.

It must have been over half a mile across, and he couldn't tell its depth.

He fired a flare, and in its light he used the telescopic lenses to examine it to the right and to the left.

The way seemed smoother to the right, and he turned in that direction and began to negotiate it.

The place was hot! So very, very hot! He hurried. And he wondered as he sped, the gauge rising before him: What had it been like on that day, Whenever? That day when a tiny sun had lain upon this spot and fought with, and for a time beaten, the brightness of the other in the sky, before it sank slowly into its sudden burrow? He tried to imagine it, succeeded, then tried to put it out of his mind and couldn't. How do you put out the fires that burn forever? He wished that he knew. There'd been so many places to go then, and he liked to move around.

What had it been like in the old days, when a man could just jump on his bike and cut out for a new town whenever he wanted? And nobody emptying buckets of crap on you from out of the sky? He felt cheated, which was not a new feeling for him, but it made him curse even longer than usual.

He lit a cigarette when he'd finally rounded the crater, and he smiled for the first time in months as the radiation gauge began to fall once more. Before many miles, he saw tall grasses swaying about him, and not too long after that he began to see trees.

Trees short and twisted, at first, but the further he fled from the place of carnage, the taller and straighter they became. They were trees such as he had never seen before — fifty, sixty feet in height — and graceful, and gathering stars, there on the plains of Illinois.

He was moving along a clean, hard, wide road, and just then he wanted to travel it forever — to Floridee, of the swamps and Spanish moss and citrus groves and fine beaches and the Gulf; and up to the cold, rocky Cape, where everything is gray and brown and the waves break below the lighthouses and the salt burns in your nose and there are graveyards where bones have

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lain for centuries and you can still read the names they bore, chiseled there into the stones above them; down through the nation where they say the grass is blue; then follow the mighty Missus Hip to the place where she spreads and comes and there's the Gulf again, full of little islands where the old boosters stashed their loot; and through the shag-topped mountains he'd heard about: the Smokies, Ozarks, Poconos, Catskills; drive through the forest of Shenandoah; park, and take a boat out over Chesapeake Bay; see the big lakes and the place where the water falls, Niagara. To drive forever along the big road, to see everything, to eat the world. Yes. Maybe it wasn't all Damnation Alley. Some of the legendary places must still be clean, like the countryside about him now. He wanted it with a hunger, with a fire like that which always burned in his loins. He laughed then, just one short, sharp bark, because now it seemed like maybe he could have it.

The music played softly, too sweetly perhaps, and it filled him.

X

By morning he was into the place called Indiana and still following the road. He passed farmhouses which seemed in good repair. There could even be people living in them. He longed to investigate, but he didn't dare to stop. Then after an hour, it was all countryside again, and degenerating.

The grasses grew shorter, shriveled, were gone. An occasional twisted tree clung to the bare earth. The radiation level began to rise once more. The signs told him he was nearing Indianapolis, which he guessed was a big city that had received a bomb and was now gone away.

Nor was he mistaken.

He had to detour far to the south to get around it, backtracking to a place called Martinsville in order to cross over the White River. Then as he headed east once more, his radio crackled and came to life. There was a faint voice, repeating, "Unidentified vehicle, halt!" and he switched all the scanners to telescopic range. Far ahead, on a hilltop, he saw a standing man with binoculars and a walkie-talkie. He did not acknowledge receipt of the transmission, but kept driving.

He was hitting forty miles an hour along a halfway decent section of roadway, and he gradually increased his speed to fifty-five, though the protesting of his tires upon the cracked pavement

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was sufficient to awaken Greg.

Tanner stared ahead, ready for an attack, and the radio kept repeating the order, louder now as he neared the hill, and called upon him to acknowledge the message.

He touched the brake as he rounded a long curve, and he did not reply to Greg's "What's the matter?"

When he saw it there, blocking the way, ready to fire, he acted instantly.

The tank filled the road, and its big gun was pointed directly at him.

As his eye sought for and found passage around it, his right hand slapped the switches that sent three armor-piercing rockets screaming ahead and his left spun the wheel counter-clockwise and his foot fell heavy on the accelerator.

He was half off the road then, bouncing along the ditch at its side, when the tank discharged one fiery belch which missed him and then caved in upon itself and blossomed.

There came the sound of rifle fire as he pulled back onto the road on the other side of the tank and sped ahead. Greg launched a single grenade to the right and the left and then hit the fifty calibers. They tore on ahead, and after about a quarter of a mile Tanner picked up his microphone and said, "Sorry about that. My brakes don't work," and hung it up again. There was no response.

As soon as they reached a level plain, commanding a good view in all directions, Tanner halted the vehicle and Greg moved into the driver's seat.

"Where do you think they got hold of that armor?"

"Who knows?"

"And why stop us?"

"They didn't know what we were carrying — and maybe they just wanted the car."

"Blasting, it's a helluva way to get it."

"If they can't have it, why should they let us keep it?"

"You know just how they think, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Have a cigarette."

Tanner nodded, accepted.

"It's been pretty bad, you know?"

"I can't argue with that."

" . . . And we've still got a long way to go."

"Yeah, so let's get rolling."

"You said before that you didn't think we'd make it."

"I've revised my opinion. Now I think we will."

"After all we've been through?"

"After all we've been through."

"What more do we have to fight with?"

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"I don't know all that yet."

"But on the other hand, we know everything there is behind us. We know how to avoid a lot of it now."

Tanner nodded.

"You tried to cut out once. Now I don't blame you."

"You getting scared, Greg?"

"I'm no good to my family if I'm dead."

"Then why'd you agree to come along?"

"I didn't know it would be like this. You had better sense, because you had an idea what it would be like."

"I had an idea."

"Nobody can blame us if we fail. After all, we've tried."

"What about all those people in Boston you made me a speech about?"

"They're probably dead by now. The plague isn't a thing that takes its time, you know?"

"What about that guy Brady? He died to get us the news."

"He tried, and God knows I respect the attempt. But we've already lost four guys. Now should we make it six, just to show that everybody tried?"

"Greg, we're a lot closer to Boston than we are to L.A. now. The tanks should have enough fuel in them to get us where we're going, but not to take us back from here."

"We can refuel in Salt Lake."

"I'm not even sure we could make it back to Salt Lake."

"Well, it'll only take a minute to figure it out. For that matter, though, we could take the bikes for the last hundred or so. They use a lot less gas."

"And you're the guy was calling me names. You're the citizen was wondering how people like me happen. You asked me what they ever did to me. I told you, too: Nothing. Now maybe I want to do something for them, just because I feel like it. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"You ain't supporting any family, Hell. I've got other people to worry about beside myself.

"You've got a nice way of putting things when you want to chicken out. You say I'm not really scared, but I've got my mother and my brothers and sisters to worry about, and I got a chick I'm hot on. That's why I'm backing down. No other reason.

"And that's right, too! I don't understand you, Hell! I don't understand you at all! You're the one who put this idea in my head in the first place!"

"So give it back, and let's get moving."

He saw Greg's hand slither toward the gun on the door, so he flipped his cigarette into his

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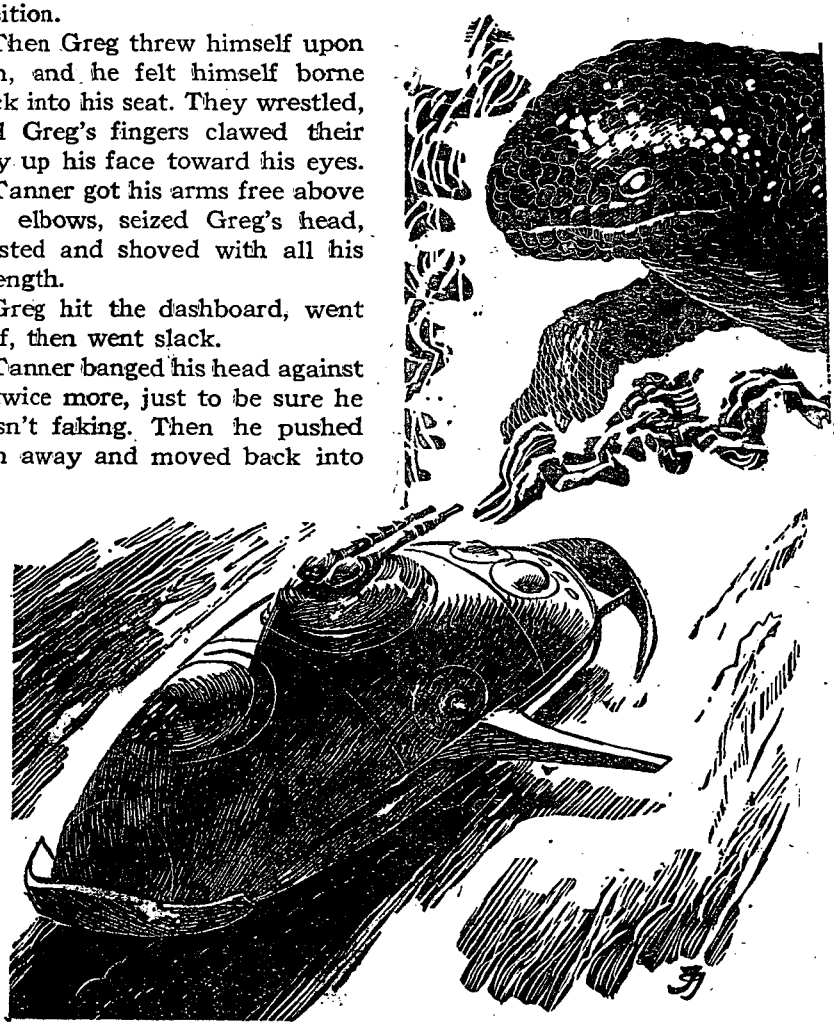
face and managed to hit him once, in the stomach — a weak, left-handed blow, but it was the best he could manage from that position.

Then Greg threw himself upon him, and he felt himself borne back into his seat. They wrestled, and Greg's fingers clawed their way up his face toward his eyes.

Tanner got his arms free above the elbows, seized Greg's head, twisted and shoved with all his strength.

Greg hit the dashboard, went stiff, then went slack.

Tanner banged his head against it twice more, just to be sure he wasn't faking. Then he pushed him away and moved back into



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the driver's seat. He checked all the screens while he caught his breath. There was nothing menacing approaching.

He fetched cord from the utility chest and bound Greg's hands behind his back. He tied his ankles together and ran a line from them to his wrists. Then he positioned him in the seat, reclined it part way and tied him in place within it.

He put the car into gear and headed toward Ohio.

Two hours later Greg began to moan, and Tanner turned the music up to drown him out. Landscape had appeared once more: grass and trees, fields of green, orchards of apples, apples still small and green, white farm houses and brown barns and red barns far removed from the roadway he raced along; rows of corn, green and swaying, brown tassels already visible and obviously tended by someone; fences of split timber, green hedges; lofty, star-leafed maples, fresh-looking road signs, a green-shingled steeple from which the sound of a bell came forth.

The lines in the sky widened, but the sky itself did not darken, as it usually did before a storm. So he drove on into the afternoon, until he reached the Dayton Abyss.

He looked down into the fog-shrouded canyon that had caused him to halt. He scanned to the left and the right, decided upon the left and headed north.

Again, the radiation level was high. And he hurried, slowing only to skirt the crevices, chasms and canyons that emanated from that dark, deep center. Thick yellow vapors seeped forth from some of these and filled the air before him. At one point they were all about him, like a clinging, sulphurous cloud, and a breeze came and parted them. Involuntarily then, he hit the brake, and the car jerked and halted and Greg moaned once more. He stared at the thing for the few seconds that it was visible, then slowly moved forward again.

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The sight was not duplicated for the whole of his passage, but it did not easily go from out of his mind, and he could not explain it where he had seen it. Yellow, hanging and grinning, he had seen a crucified skeleton there beside the Abyss. *People,* he decided. *That explains everything.*

When he left the region of fogs the sky was still dark. He did not realize for a time that he was in the open once more. It had taken him close to four hours to skirt Dayton, and now as he headed across a blasted heath, going east again, he saw for a moment a tiny piece of the sun, like a sickle, fighting its way ashore on the northern bank of a black river in the sky, and failing.

His lights were turned up to their fullest intensity, and as he realized what might follow he looked in every direction for shelter.

There was an old barn on a hill, and he raced toward it. One side had caved in, and the doors had fallen down. He edged in, however, and the interior was moist and moldy looking under his lights. He saw a skeleton which he guessed to be that of a horse within a fallen-down stall.

He parked and turned off his lights and waited.

Soon the wailing came again and drowned out Greg's occasional moans and mutterings. There came another sound, not hard and heavy like gunfire, as that which he had heard in L.A., but gentle, steady and almost purring.

He cracked the door, to hear it better.

Nothing assailed him, so he stepped down from the cab and walked back a ways. The radiation level was almost normal, so he didn't bother with his protective suit. He walked back toward the fallen doors and looked outside. He wore the pistol behind his belt.

Something gray descended in droplets and the sun fought itself partly free once more.

It was rain, pure and simple. He had never seen rain, pure and simple, before. So he lit a cigarette and watched it fall.

It came down with only an occasional rumbling and nothing else accompanied it. The sky was still a bluish color beyond the bands of black.

It fell all about him. It ran down the frame to his left. A random gust of wind blew some droplets into his face, and he realized that they were water, nothing more. Puddles formed on the ground outside. He tossed a chunk of wood into one and saw it splash and float. From

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somewhere high up inside the barn he heard the sound of birds. He smelled the sick-sweet smell of decaying straw. Off in the shadows to his right he saw a rusted threshing machine. Some feathers drifted down about him, and he caught one in his hand and studied it. Light, dark, fluffy, ribbed. He'd never really looked at a feather before. It worked almost like a zipper, the way the individual branches clung to one another. He let it go, and the wind caught it, and it vanished somewhere toward his back. He looked out once more, and back along his trail. He could probably drive through what was coming down now. But he realized just how tired he was. He found a barrel and sat down on it and lit another cigarette.

It had been a good run so far, and he found himself thinking about its last stages. He couldn't trust Greg for awhile yet. Not until they were so far that there could be no turning back. Then they'd need each other so badly that he could turn him loose. He hoped he hadn't scrambled his brains completely. He didn't know what more the alley held. If the storms were less from here on in, however, that would be a big help.

He sat there for a long while, feeling the cold, moist breezes; and the rainfall lessened after a time, and he went back to the car and started it. Greg was still unconscious, he noted, as he backed out. This might not be good.

He took a pill to keep himself alert and he ate some rations as he drove along. The rain continued to come down, but gently. It fell all the way across Ohio, and the sky remained overcast. He crossed into West Virginia at the place called Parkersburg, and then he veered slightly to the north, going by the old Rand McNally he'd been furnished. The gray day went away into black night, and he drove on.

There were no more of the dark bats around to trouble him, but he passed several more craters and the radiation gauge rose, and at one point a pack of huge wild dogs pursued him, baying and howling, and they ran along the road and snapped at his tires and barked and yammered and then fell back. There were some tremors beneath his wheels as he passed another mountain and it spewed forth bright clouds to his left and made a kind of thunder. Ashes fell, and he drove through them. A flash flood splashed over him, and the engine sputtered and died, twice; but he started it again each time and pushed on ahead, the waters lapping about his sides. Then he reached higher,

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drier ground, and riflemen tried to bar his way. He strafed them and hurled a grenade and drove on by. When the darkness went away and the dim moon came up, dark birds circled him and dove down at him, but he ignored them and after a time they, too, were gone.

He drove until he felt tired again, and then he ate some more and took another pill. By then he was in Pennsylvania, and he felt that if Greg would only come around he would turn him loose and trust him with the driving.

He halted twice to visit the latrine, and he tugged at the golden band in his pierced left ear, and he blew his nose and scratched himself. Then he ate more rations and continued on.

He began to ache, in all his muscles, and he wanted to stop and rest, but he was afraid of the things that might come upon him if he did.

As he drove through another dead town, the rains started again. Not hard, just a drizzly downpour, cold-looking and sterile — a brittle, shiny screen. He stopped in the middle of the road before the thing he'd almost driven into, and he stared at it.

He'd thought at first that it was more black lines in the sky. He'd halted because they'd seemed to appear too suddenly.

It was a spider's web, strands thick as his arm, strung between two leaning buildings.

He switched on his forward flame and began to burn it.

When the fires died, he saw the approaching shape, coming down from high above.

It was a spider, larger than himself, rushing to check the disturbance.

He elevated the rocket launchers, took careful aim and pierced it with one white-hot missile.

It still hung there in the trembling web and seemed to be kicking.

He turned on the flame again, for a full ten seconds, and when it subsided there was an open way before him.

He rushed through, wide awake and alert once again, his pains forgotten. He drove as fast as he could, trying to forget the sight.

Another mountain smoked, ahead and to his right, but it did not bloom, and few ashes descended as he passed it.

He made coffee and drank a cup. After awhile it was morning, and he raced toward it.

XI

He was stuck in the mud, somewhere in eastern Pennsylvania, and cursing. Greg was looking very pale. The sun was

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nearing midheaven. He leaned back and closed his eyes. It was too much.

He slept.

He awoke and felt worse. There was a banging on the side of the car. His hands moved toward fire-control and wing-control, automatically, and his eyes sought the screens.

He saw an old man, and there were two younger men with him. They were armed, but they stood right before the left wing, and he knew he could cut them in half in an instant.

He activated the outside speaker and the audio pickup.

"What do you want?" he asked, and his voice crackled forth.

"You okay?" the old man called.

"Not really. You caught me sleeping."

"You stuck?"

"That's about the size of it."

"I got a mule team can maybe get you out. Can't get 'em here before tomorrow morning, though."

"Great!" said Tanner. "I'd appreciated it."

"Where you from?"

"L.A."

"What's that?"

"Los Angeles. West Coast."

There was some murmuring, then, "You're a long way from home, mister."

"Don't I know it. — Look, if you're serious about those mules, I'd appreciate hell out of it. It's an emergency."

"What kind of?"

"You know about Boston?"

"I know it's there."

"Well, people are dying up that way, of the plague. I've got drugs here can save them, if I can get through."

There were some more murmurs, then, "We'll help you. Boston's pretty important, and we'll get you loose. Want to come back with us?"

"Where? And who are you?"

"The name's Samuel Potter, and these are my sons, Roderick and Caliban. My farm's about six miles off. You're welcome to spend the night."

"It's not that I don't trust you," said Tanner. "It's just that I don't trust anybody, if you know what I mean. I've been shot at too much recently to want to take the chance."

"Well, how about if we put up our guns? You're probably able to shoot us from there, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"So we're taking a chance just standing here. We're willing to help you. We'd stand to lose if the Boston traders stopped coming to Albany. If there's someone else inside, he can cover you."

"Wait a minute," said Tanner, and he opened the door.

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The old man stuck out his hand, and Tanner took it and shook it, also his sons'.

"Is there any kind of doctor around here?" he asked.

"In the settlement — about thirty miles north."

"My partner's hurt. I think he needs a doctor." He gestured back toward the cab.

Sam moved forward and peered within.

"Why's he all trussed up like that?"

"He went off his rocker, and I had to clobber him. I tied him up, to be safe. But now he doesn't look so good."

"Then let's whip up a stretcher and get him onto it. You lock up tight then, and my boys'll bring him back to the house. We'll send someone for the Doc. You don't look so good yourself. Bet you'd like a bath and a shave and a clean bed."

"I don't feel so good," Tanner said. "Let's make that stretcher quick, before we need two."

He sat up on the fender and smoked while the Potter boys cut trees and stripped them. Waves of fatigue washed over him, and he found it hard to keep his eyes open. His feet felt very far away, and his shoulders ached. The cigarette fell from his fingers, and he leaned backward on the hood.

Someone was slapping his leg. He forced his eyes open and looked down.

"Okay," Potter said. "We cut your partner loose and we got him on the stretcher. Want to lock up and get moving?"

Tanner nodded and jumped down. He sank almost up to his boot tops when he hit, but he closed the cab and staggered toward the old man in buckskin.

They began walking across country, and after awhile it became mechanical.

Samuel Potter kept up a steady line of chatter as he led the way, rifle resting in the crook of his arm. Maybe it was to keep Tanner awake.

"It's not too far, son, and it'll be pretty easy going in just a few minutes now. What'd you say your name was anyhow?"

"Hell," said Tanner.

"Beg pardon?"

"Hell. Hell's my name. Hell Tanner."

Sam Potter chuckled.

"That's a pretty mean name, mister. If it's okay with you, I'll introduce you to my wife and the youngest as 'Mister Tanner'. All right?"

"That's just fine," Tanner gasped, pulling his boots out of the mire with a sucking sound.

"We'd sure miss them Boston traders. I hope you make it in time."

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"What is it that they do?"

"They keep shops in Albany, and twice a year they give a fair — spring and fall. They carry all sort of things we need — needles, thread, pepper, kettles, pans, seed, guns and ammo, all kind of things — and the fairs are pretty good times, too. Most anybody between here and there would help you along. Hope you make it. We'll get you off to a good start again."

They reached higher, drier ground.

"You mean it's pretty clear sailing after this?"

"Well, no. But I'll help you on a map and tell you what to look out for."

"I got mine with me," said Tanner, as they topped a hill, and he saw a farm house off in the distance. "That your place?"

"Correct. It ain't much further now. Real easy walkin' — an' you just lean on my shoulder if you get tired."

"I can make it," said Tanner. "It's just that I had so many of those pills to keep me awake that I'm starting to feel all the sleep I've been missing. I'll be okay."

"You'll get to sleep real soon now. And when you're awake again, we'll go over that map of yours, and you can write in all the places I tell you about."

"Good scene," said Tanner, "good scene," and he put his hand on Sam's shoulder then and staggered along beside him, feeling almost drunk and wishing he were.

After a hazy eternity he saw the house before him, then the door. The door swung open, and he felt himself falling forward, and that was it.

XII

Sleep. Blackness, distant voices, more blackness. Wherever he lay, it was soft, and he turned over onto his other side and went away again.

When everything finally flowed together into a coherent ball and he opened his eyes, there was light streaming in through the window to his right, falling in rectangles upon the patchwork quilt that covered him. He groaned, stretched, rubbed his eyes and scratched his beard.

He surveyed the room carefully: polished wooden floors with handwoven rugs of blue and red and gray scattered about them, a dresser holding a white enamel basin with a few black spots up near its lip where some of the enamel had chipped away, a mirror on the wall behind him and above all that, a spindly looking rocker near the window, a print cushion on its seat, a

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small table against the other wall with a chair pushed in beneath it, books and paper and pen and ink on the table, a hand-stitched sampler on the wall asking God to Bless, a blue and green print of a waterfall on the other wall.

He sat up, discovered he was naked, looked around for his clothing. It was nowhere in sight.

As he sat there, deciding whether or not to call out, the door opened, and Sam walked in. He carried Tanner's clothing, clean and neatly folded, over one arm. In his other hand he carried his boots, and they shone like wet midnight.

"Heard you stirring around," he said. "How you feeling now?"

"A lot better, thanks."

"We've got a bath all drawn. Just have to dump in a couple buckets of hot, and it's all yours. I'll have the boys carry it in in a minute, and some soap and towels."

Tanner bit his lip, but he didn't want to seem inhospitable to his benefactor, so he nodded and forced a smile then.

"That'll be fine."

" . . . And there's a razor and a scissors on the dresser — whichever you might want."

He nodded again. Sam set his clothes down on the rocker and his boots on the floor beside it, then left the room.

Soon Roderick and Caliban brought in the tub, spread some sacks and set it upon them.

"How you feeling?" one of them asked. (Tanner wasn't sure which was which. They both seemed graceful as scarecrows, and their mouths were packed full of white teeth.)

"Real good," he said.

"Bet you're hungry," said the other. "You slep' all afternoon yesterday and all night and most of this morning."

"You know it," said Tanner. "How's my partner?"

The nearer one shook his head, and, "Still sleeping and sickly," he said. "The Doc should be here soon. Our kid brother went after him last night."

They turned to leave, and the one who had been speaking added, "Soon as you get cleaned up, Ma'll fix you something to eat. Cal and me are going out now to try and get your rig loose. Dad'll tell you about the roads while you eat."

"Thanks."

"Good morning to you."

" 'Morning."

They closed the door behind them as they left.

Tanner got up and moved to the mirror, studied himself.

"Well, just this once," he muttered.

Then he washed his face and

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trimmed his beard and cut his hair.

Then, gritting his teeth, he lowered himself into the tub, soaped up and scrubbed. The water grew gray and scummy beneath the suds. He splashed out and toweled himself down and dressed.

He was starched and crinkly and smelled faintly of disinfectant. He smiled at his dark-eyed reflection and lit a cigarette. He combed his hair and studied the stranger. "Damn! I'm beautiful!" he chuckled, and then he opened the door and entered the kitchen.

Sam was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee, and his wife who was short and heavy and wore long gray skirts was facing in the other direction, leaning over the stove. She turned, and he saw that her face was large, with bulging red cheeks that dimpled and a little white scar in the middle of her forehead. Her hair was brown, shot through with gray, and pulled back into a knot. She bobbed her head and smiled a "Good morning" at him.

"'Morning," he replied. "I'm afraid I left kind of a mess in the other room."

"Don't worry about that," said Sam. "Seat yourself, and we'll have you some breakfast in a minute. The boys told you about your friend?"

Tanner nodded.

As she placed a cup of coffee in front of Tanner, Sam said, "Wife's name's Susan."

"How do," she said.

"Hi."

"Now, then, I got your map here. Saw it sticking out of your jacket. That's your gun hanging aside the door, too. Anyhows, I've been figuring and I think the best way you could head would be up to Albany and then go along the old Route 9, which is in pretty good shape." He spread the map and pointed as he talked. "Now, it won't be all of a picnic," he said, "but it looks like the cleanest and fastest way in —"

"Breakfast," said his wife and pushed the map aside to set a plate full of eggs and bacon and sausages in front of Tanner and another one, holding four pieces of toast, next to it. There was marmalade, jam, jelly and butter on the table, and Tanner helped himself to it and sipped the coffee and filled the empty places inside while Sam talked.

He told him about the gangs that ran between Boston and Albany on bikes, hijacking anything they could, and that was the reason most cargo went in convoys with shotgun riders aboard. "But you don't have to worry, with that rig of yours, do you?" he asked, and Tanner said, "Hope not," and wolfed down

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more food. He wondered, though, if they were anything like his old pack, and he hoped not, again, for both their sakes.

Tanner raised his coffee cup, and he heard a sound outside.

The door opened, and a boy ran into the kitchen. Tanner figured him as between ten and twelve years of age. An older man followed him, carrying the traditional black bag.

"We're here! We're here!" cried the boy, and Sam stood and shook hands with the man, so Tanner figured he should, too. He wiped his mouth and gripped the man's hand and said, "My partner sort of went out of his head. He jumped me, and we had a fight. I shoved him, and he banged his head on the dashboard."

The doctor, a dark-haired man, probably in his late forties, wore a dark suit. His face was heavily lined, and his eyes looked tired. He nodded.

Sam said, "I'll take you to him," and he led him out through the door at the other end of the kitchen.

Tanner reseated himself and picked up the last piece of toast. Susan refilled his coffee cup, and he nodded to her.

"My name's Jerry," said the boy, seating himself in his father's abandoned chair. "Is your name, mister, really Hell?"

"Hush, you!" said his mother.

"'Fraid so," said Tanner.

". . . And you drove all the way across the country? Through the Alley?"

"So far."

"What was it like?"

"Mean."

"What all'd you see?"

"Bats as big as this kitchen — some of them even bigger — on the other side of the Missus Hip. Lot of them in Saint Louis."

"What'd you do?"

"Shot 'em. Burnt 'em. Drove through 'em."

"What else you see?"

"Gila monsters. Big, technicolor lizards — the size of a barn. Dust Devils — big circling winds that sucked up one car. Fire-topped mountains. Real big thorn bushes that we had to burn. Drove through some storms. Drove over places where the ground was like glass. Drove along where the ground was shaking. Drove around big craters, all radioactive."

"Wish I could do that some day."

"Maybe you will, some day."

Tanner finished the food and lit a cigarette and sipped the coffee.

"Real good breakfast," he called out. "Best I've eaten in days. Thanks."

Susan smiled, then said, "Jerry,

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don't go an' pester the man."

"No bother, Missus. He's okay."

"What's that ring on your hand?" said Jerry. "It looks like a snake."

"That's what it is," said Tanner, pulling it off. "It is sterling silver with red glass eyes, and I got it in a place called Tijuana. Here. You keep it."

"I couldn't take that," said the boy, and he looked at his mother, his eyes asking if he could. She shook her head from left to right, and Tanner saw it and said, "Your folks were good enough to help me out and get a Doc for my partner and feed me and give me a place to sleep. I'm sure they won't mind if I want to show my appreciation a little bit and give you this ring," and Jerry looked back at his mother, and Tanner nodded and she nodded too.

Jerry whistled and jumped up and put it on his finger.

"It's too big," he said.

"Here, let me mash it a bit for you. These spiral kind'll fit anybody if you squeeze them a little."

He squeezed the ring and gave it back to the boy to try on. It was still too big, so he squeezed it again and then it fit.

Jerry put it on and began to run from the room.

"Wait!" his mother said. "What do you say?"

He turned around and said, "Thank you, Hell."

"Mister Tanner," she said.

"Mister Tanner," the boy repeated, and the door banged behind him.

"That was good of you," she said.

Tanner shrugged.

"He liked it," he said. "Glad I could turn him on with it."

He finished his coffee and his cigarette, and she gave him another cup, and he lit another cigarette. After a time, Sam and the doctor came out of the other room, and Tanner began wondering where the family had slept the night before. Susan poured them both coffee, and they seated themselves at the table to drink it.

"Your friend's got a concussion," the doctor said. "I can't really tell how serious his condition is without getting X rays, and there's no way of getting them here. I wouldn't recommend moving him, though."

Tanner said, "For how long?"

"Maybe a few days, maybe a couple weeks. I've left some medication and told Sam what to do for him. Sam says there's a plague in Boston and you've got to hurry. My advice is that you go on without him. Leave him here with the Potters. He'll be

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taken care of. He can go up to Albany with them for the Spring Fair and make his way to Boston from there on some commercial carrier. I think he'll be all right."

Tanner thought about it awhile, then nodded.

"Okay," he said, "if that's the way it's got to be."

"That's what I recommend."

They drank their coffee.

XIII

Tanner regarded his freed vehicle, said, "I guess I'll be going, then," and nodded to the Potters. "Thanks," he said, and he unlocked the cab, climbed into it and started the engine. He put it into gear, blew the horn twice and started to move.

In the screen, he saw the three men waving. He stamped the accelerator, and they were gone from sight.

He sped ahead, and the way was easy. The sky was salmon pink. The earth was brown, and there was much green grass. The bright sun caught the day in a silver net.

This part of the country seemed virtually untouched by the chaos that had produced the rest of the Alley. Tanner played music, drove along. He passed two trucks on the road and honked his horn each time. Once, he received a reply.

He drove all that day, and it was well into the night when he pulled into Albany. The streets themselves were dark, and only a few lights shone from the buildings. He drew up in front of a flickering red sign that said "BAR & GRILL," parked and entered.

It was small, and there was jukebox music playing, tunes he'd never heard before, and the lighting was poor, and there was sawdust on the floor.

He sat down at the bar and pushed the Magnum way down behind his belt so that it didn't show. Then he took off his jacket, because of the heat in the place, and he threw it on the stool next to him. When the man in the white apron approached, he said, "Give me a shot and a beer and a ham sandwich."

The man nodded his bald head and threw a shot glass in front of Tanner, which he then filled. Then he siphoned off a foam-capped mug and hollered over his right shoulder.

Tanner tossed off the shot and sipped the beer. After awhile, a white plate bearing a sandwich appeared on the sill across from him. After a longer while, the bartender passed, picked it up, and deposited it in front of him. He wrote something on a green chit and tucked it under the corner of the plate.

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Tanner bit into the sandwich and washed it down with a mouthful of beer. He studied the people about him and decided they made the same noises as people in any other bar he'd ever been in. The old man to his left looked friendly, so he asked him, "Any news about Boston?"

The man's chin quivered between words, and it seemed a natural thing for him.

"No news at all. Looks like the merchants will close their shops at the end of the week."

"What day is today?"

"Tuesday."

Tanner finished his sandwich and smoked a cigarette while he drank the rest of his beer.

Then he looked at the check, and it said, ".85."

He tossed a dollar bill on top of it and turned to go.

He had taken two steps when the bartender called out, "Wait a minute, mister."

He turned around.

"Yeah?"

"What you trying to pull?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you call this crap?"

"What crap?"

The man waved Tanner's dollar at him, and he stepped forward and inspected it.

"Nothing wrong I can see. What's giving you a pain?"

"That ain't money."

"You trying to tell me my money's no good?"

"That's what I said. I never seen no bill like that."

"Well, look at it real careful. Read that print down there at the bottom of it."

The room grew quiet. One man got off his stool and walked forward. He held out his hand and said, "Let me see it, Bill."

The bartender passed it to him, and the man's eyes widened.

"This is drawn on the Bank of the Nation of California."

"Well, that's where I'm from," said Tanner.

"I'm sorry, it's no good here," said the bartender.

"It's the best I got," said Tanner.

"Well, nobody'll make good on it around here. You got any Boston money on you?"

"Never been to Boston."

"Then how the hell'd you get here?"

"Drove."

"Don't hand me that line of crap, son. Where'd you steal this?" It was the older man who had spoken.

"You going to take my money or ain't you?" said Tanner.

"I'm not going to take it," said the bartender.

"Then screw you," said Tanner, and he turned and walked toward the door.

As always, under such circum-

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stances, he was alert to sounds at his back.

When he heard the quick footfall, he turned. It was the man who had inspected the bill that stood before him, his right arm extended.

Tanner's right hand held his leather jacket, draped over his right shoulder. He swung it with all his strength, forward and down.

It struck the man on the top of his head, and he fell.

There came up a murmuring, and several people jumped to their feet and moved toward him.

Tanner dragged the gun from his belt and said, "Sorry, folks," and he pointed it, and they stopped.

"Now you probably ain't about to believe me," he said, "when I tell you that Boston's been hit by the plague, but it's true all right. Or maybe you will, I don't know. But I don't think you're going to believe that I drove here all the way from the nation of California with a car full of Haffikine antiserum. But that's just as right. You send that bill to the big bank in Boston, and they'll change it for you, all right, and you know it. Now I've got to be going, and don't anybody try to stop me. If you think I've been handing you a line, you take a look at what I drive away in. That's all I've got to say."

And he backed out the door and covered it while he mounted the cab. Inside, he gunned the engine to life, turned, and roared away.

In the rearview screen he could see the knot of people on the walk before the bar, watching him depart.

He laughed, and the apple-blossom moon hung dead ahead.

XIV

Albany to Boston. A couple hundred miles. He'd managed the worst of it. The terrors of Damnation Alley lay largely at his back now. Night. It flowed about him. The stars seemed brighter than usual. He'd make it, the night seemed to say.

He passed between hills. The road wasn't too bad. It wound between trees and high grasses. He passed a truck coming in his direction and dimmed his lights as it approached. It did the same.

It must have been around midnight that he came to the crossroads, and the lights suddenly nailed him from two directions.

He was bathed in perhaps thirty beams from the left and as many from the right.

He pushed the accelerator to the floor, and he heard engine after engine coming to life somewhere at his back. And he recognized the sounds.

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They were all of them bikes.

They swung onto the road behind him.

He could have opened fire. He could have braked and laid down a cloud of flame. It was obvious that they didn't know what they were chasing. He could have launched grenades. He refrained, however.

It could have been him on the lead bike, he decided, all hot on hijack. He felt a certain sad kinship as his hand hovered above the fire-control.

Try to outrun them, first.

His engine was open wide and roaring, but he couldn't take the bikes.

When they began to fire, he knew that he'd have to retaliate. He couldn't risk their hitting a gas tank or blowing out his tires.

Their first few shots had been in the nature of a warning. He couldn't risk another barrage. If only they knew . . . .

The speaker!

He cut in and mashed the button and spoke:

"Listen, cats," he said. "All I got's medicine for the sick citizens in Boston. Let me through or you'll hear the noise."

A shot followed immediately, so he opened fire with the fifty calibers to the rear.

He saw them fall, but they kept firing. So he launched grenades.

The firing lessened, but didn't cease.

So he hit the brakes, then the flame-throwers. He kept it up for fifteen seconds.

There was silence.

When the air cleared he studied the screens.

They lay all over the road, their bikes upset, their bodies fuming. Several were still seated, and they held rifles and pointed them, and he shot them down.

A few still moved, spasmodically, and he was about to drive on, when he saw one rise and take a few staggering steps and fall again.

His hand hesitated on the gearshift.

It was a girl.

He thought about it for perhaps five seconds, then jumped down from the cab and ran toward her.

As he did, one man raised himself on an elbow and picked up a fallen rifle.

Tanner shot him twice and kept running, pistol in hand.

The girl was crawling toward a man whose face had been shot away. Other bodies twisted about Tanner now, there on the road, in the glare of the tail beacons. Blood and black leather, the sounds of moaning and the stench of burnt flesh were all about him.

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When he got to the girl's side, she cursed him softly as he stopped.

None of the blood about her seemed to be her own.

He dragged her to her feet and her eyes began to fill with tears.

Everyone else was dead or dying, so Tanner picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the car. He reclined the passenger seat and put her into it, moving the weapons into the rear seat, out of her reach.

Then he gunned the engine and moved forward. In the rearview screen he saw two figures rise to their feet, then fall again.

She was a tall girl, with long, uncombed hair the color of dirt. She had a strong chin and a wide mouth and there were dark circles under her eyes. A single faint line crossed her forehead, and she had all of her teeth. The right side of her face was flushed, as if sunburnt. Her left trouser leg was torn and dirty. He guessed that she'd caught the edge of his flame and fallen from her bike.

"You okay?" he asked, when her sobbing had diminished to a moist sniffing sound.

"What's it to you?" she said, raising a hand to her cheek.

Tanner shrugged.

"Just being friendly."

"You killed most of my gang."

"What would they have done to me?"

"They would have stomped you, mister, if it weren't for this fancy car of yours."

"It ain't really mine," he said. "It belongs to the nation of California."

"This thing don't come from California."

"The hell it don't. I drove it."

She sat up straight then and began rubbing her leg.

Tanner lit a cigarette.

"Give me a cigarette?" she said.

He passed her the one he had lighted, lit himself another. As he handed it to her, her eyes rested on his tattoo.

"What's that?"

"My name."

"Hell?"

"Hell."

"Where'd you get a name like that?"

"From my old man."

They smoked awhile, then she said, "Why'd you run the Alley?"

"Because it was the only way I could get them to turn me loose."

"From where?"

"The place with horizontal Venetian blinds. I was doing time."

"They let you go? Why?"

"Because of the big sick. I'm bringing in Haffikine antiserum."

"You're Hell Tanner."

"Huh?"

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"Your last name's Tanner, ain't it?"

"That's right. Who told you?"

"I heard about you. Everybody thought you died in the Big Raid."

"They were wrong."

"What was it like?"

"I dunno. I was already wearing a zebra suit. That's why I'm still around."

"Why'd you pick me up?"

"'Cause you're a chick, and 'cause I didn't want to see you croak."

"Thanks. You got anything to eat in here?"

"Yeah, there's food in there." He pointed to the refrigerator door. "Help yourself."

She did, and as she ate Tanner asked her, "What do they call you?"

"Corny," she said. "It's short for Cornelia."

"Okay, Corny," he said. "When you're finished eating, you start telling me about the road between here and the place."

She nodded, chewed and swallowed. Then, "There's lots of other gangs," she said. "So you'd better be ready to blast them."

"I am."

"Those screens show you all directions, huh?"

"That's right."

"Good. The roads are pretty much okay from here on in. There's one big crater you'll come to soon and a couple little volcanos afterwards."

"Check."

"Outside of them there's nothing to worry about but the Regents and the Devils and the Kings and the Lovers. That's about it."

Tanner nodded.

"How big are those clubs?"

"I don't know for sure, but the Kings are the biggest. They've got a coupla hundred."

"What was your club?"

"The Studs."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Whatever you tell me."

"Okay, Corny. I'll let you off anywhere along the way that you want me to. If you don't want, you can come on into the city with me."

"You call it, Hell. Anywhere you want to go, I'll go along."

Her voice was deep, and her words came slowly, and her tone sandpapered his eardrums just a bit. She had long legs and heavy thighs beneath the tight denim. Tanner licked his lips and studied the screens. Did he want to keep her around for awhile?

The road was suddenly wet. It was covered with hundreds of fishes, and more were falling from the sky. There followed several loud reports from overhead. The blue light began in the north.

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Tanner raced on, and suddenly there was water all about him. It fell upon his car, it dimmed his screens. The sky had grown black again, and the banshee-wail sounded above him.

He skidded around a sharp curve in the road. He turned up his lights.

The rain ceased, but the wailing continued. He ran for fifteen minutes before it built up into a roar.

The girl stared at the screens and occasionally glanced at Tanner.

"What're you going to do?" she finally asked him.

"Outrun it, if I can," he said.

"It's dark for as far ahead as I can see. I don't think you can do it."

"Neither do I, but what does that leave?"

"Hole up someplace."

"If you know where, you show me."

"There's a place a few miles further ahead — a bridge you can get under."

"Okay, that's for us. Sing out when you see it."

She pulled off her boots and rubbed her feet. He gave her another cigarette.

"Hey, Corny — I just thought — there's a medicine chest over there to your right. Yeah, that's it. It should have some damn kind of salve in it you can smear on your face to take the bite out."

She found a tube of something and rubbed some of it into her cheek, smiled slightly and replaced it.

"Feel any better?"

"Yes. Thanks."

The stones began to fall, the blue to spread. The sky pulsed, grew brighter.

"I don't like the looks of this one."

"I don't like the looks of any of them."

"It seems there's been an awful lot this past week."

"Yeah. I've heard it said maybe the winds are dying down — that the sky might be purging itself."

"That'd be nice," said Tanner.

"Then we might be able to see it the way it used to look — blue all the time, and with clouds. You know about clouds."

"I heard about them."

"White, puffy things that just sort of drift across — sometimes gray. They don't drop anything except rain, and not always that."

"Yeah, I know."

"You ever see any out in L.A.?"

"No."

The yellow streaks began, and the black lines writhed like snakes. The stonefall rattled heavily upon the roof and the hood. More water began to fall,

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and a fog rose up. Tanner was forced to slow, and then it seemed as if sledgehammers beat upon the car.

"We won't make it," she said.

"The hell you say. This thing's built to take it — and what's that off in the distance?"

"The bridge!" she said, moving forward. "That's it! Pull off the road to the left and go down. That's a dry riverbed beneath."

Then the lightning began to fall. It flamed, flashed about them. They passed a burning tree, and there were still fishes in the roadway.

Tanner turned left as he approached the bridge. He slowed to a crawl and made his way over the shoulder and down the slick, muddy grade.

When he hit the damp riverbed he turned right. He nosed it in under the bridge, and they were all alone there. Some waters trickled past them, and the lightnings continued to flash. The sky was a shifting kaleidoscope and constant came the thunder. He could hear a sound like hail on the bridge above them.

"We're safe," he said and killed the engine.

"Are the doors locked?"

"They do it automatically."

Tanner turned off the outside lights.

"Wish I could buy you a drink, besides coffee."

"Coffee'd be good, just right."

"Okay, it's on the way," and he cleaned out the pot and filled it and plugged it in.

They sat there and smoked as the storm raged, and he said, "You know, it's a kind of nice feeling being all snug as a rat in a hole while everything goes to hell outside. Listen to that bastard come down! And we couldn't care less."

"I suppose so," she said. "What're you going to do after you make it in to Boston?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . . Maybe get a job, scrape up some loot and maybe open a bike shop or a garage. Either one'd be nice."

"Sounds good. You going to ride much yourself?"

"You bet. I don't suppose they have any good clubs *in* town?"

"No. They're all roadrunners."

"Thought so. Maybe I'll organize my own."

He reached out and touched her hand, then squeezed it.

"I can buy *you* a drink."

"What do you mean?"

She drew a plastic flask from the right side pocket of her jacket. She uncapped it and passed it to him.

"Here."

He took a mouthful and gulped it, coughed, took a second, then handed it back.

"Great! You're a woman of un-

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suspected potential and like that. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," and she took a drink herself and set the flask on the dash.

"Cigarette?"

"Just a minute."

He lit two, passed her one.

"There you are, Corny."

"Thanks. I'd like to help you finish this run."

"How come?"

"I got nothing else to do. My crowd's all gone away, and I've got nobody else to run with now. Also, if you make it, you'll be a big man. Like capital letters. Think you might keep me around after that?"

"Maybe. What are you like?"

"Oh, I'm real nice. I'll even rub your shoulders for you when they're sore."

"They're sore now."

"I thought so. Give me a lean."

He bent toward her, and she began to rub his shoulders. Her hands were quick and strong.

"You do that good, girl."

"Thanks."

He straightened up, leaned back. Then he reached out, took the flask and had another drink. She took a small sip when he passed it to her.

The furies rode about them, but the bridge above stood the siege. Tanner turned off the lights.

"Let's make it," he said, and he seized her and drew her to him.

She did not resist him, and he found her belt buckle and unfastened it. Then he started on the buttons. After awhile, he reclined her seat.

"Will you keep me?" she asked him.

"Sure."

"I'll help you. I'll do anything you say to get you through."

"Great."

"After all, if Boston goes, then we go, too."

"You bet."

Then they didn't say much more.

There was violence in the skies, and after that came darkness and quiet.

XV

When Tanner awoke, it was morning and the storm had ceased. He repaired himself to the rear of the vehicle and after that assumed the driver's seat once more.

Cornelia did not awaken as he gunned the engine to life and started up the weed-infested slope of the hillside.

The sky was light once more, and the road was strewn with rubble. Tanner wove along it, heading toward the pale sun, and after awhile Cornelia stretched.

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"Ungh," she said, and Tanner agreed. "My shoulders are better now," he told her.

"Good," and Tanner headed up a hill, slowly as the day dimmed and one huge black line became the Devil's highway down the middle of the sky.

As he drove through a wooded valley, the rain began to fall. The girl had returned from the rear of the vehicle and was preparing breakfast when Tanner saw the tiny dot on the horizon, switched over to his telescope lenses and tried to outrun what he saw.

Cornelia looked up.

There were bikes, bikes, and more bikes on their trail.

"Those your people?" Tanner asked.

"No. You took mine yesterday."

"Too bad," said Tanner, and he pushed the accelerator to the floor and hoped for a storm.

They squealed around a curve and climbed another hill. His pursuers drew nearer. He switched back from telescope to normal scanning, but even then he could see the size of the crowd that approached.

"It must be the Kings," she said. "They're the biggest club around."

"Too bad," said Tanner.

"For them or for us?"

"Both."

She smiled.

"I'd like to see how you work this thing."

"It looks like you're going to get a chance. They're gaining on us like mad."

The rain lessened, but the fogs grew heavier. Tanner could see their lights, though, over a quarter mile to his rear, and he did not turn his own on. He estimated a hundred to a hundred fifty pursuers that cold, dark morning, and he asked, "How near are we to Boston?"

"Maybe ninety miles," she told him.

"Too bad they're chasing us instead of coming toward us," he said, as he primed his flames and set an adjustment which brought cross-hairs into focus on his rearview screen.

"What's that?" she asked.

"That's a cross. I'm going to crucify them, lady," and she smiled at this and squeezed his arm.

"Can I help? I hate those bloody mothers."

"In a little while," said Tanner. "In a little while, I'm sure," and he reached into the rear seat and fetched out the six hand grenades and hung them on his wide, black belt. He passed the rifle to the girl. "Hang onto this," he said, and stuck the .45 behind his belt.

"Do you know how to use that thing?"

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"Yes," she replied immediately.

"Good."

He kept watching the lights that danced on the screen.

"Why the hell doesn't this storm break?" he said, as the lights came closer and he could make out shapes within the fog.

When they were within a hundred feet he fired the first grenade. It arched through the gray air, and five seconds later there was a bright flash to his rear, burning within a thunderclap.

The lights immediately behind him remained, and he touched the fifty-calibers, moving the crosshairs from side to side. The guns shattered their loud syllables, and he launched another grenade. With the second flash, he began to climb another hill.

"Did you stop them?"

"For a time, maybe. I still see some lights, but farther back."

After five minutes, they had reached the top, a place where the fogs were cleared and the dark sky was visible above them. Then they started downward once more, and a wall of stone and shale and dirt rose to their right. Tanner considered it as they descended.

When the road leveled and he decided they had reached the bottom, he turned on his brightest lights and looked for a place where the road's shoulders were wide.

To his rear, there were suddenly rows of descending lights.

He found the place where the road was sufficiently wide, and he skidded through a U turn until he was facing the shaggy cliff, now to his left, and his pursuers were coming dead on.

He elevated his rockets, fired one, elevated them five degrees more, fired two, elevated them another five degrees, fired three. Then he lowered them fifteen and fired another.

There were brightnesses within the fog, and he heard the stones rattling on the road and felt the vibration as the rockslide began. He swung toward his right as he backed the vehicle and fired two ahead. There was dust mixed with the fog now, and the vibration continued.

He turned and headed forward once more.

"I hope that'll hold 'em," he said, and he lit two cigarettes and passed one to the girl.

After five minutes they were on higher ground again and the winds came and whipped at the fog, and far to the rear there were still some lights.

As they topped a high rise, his radiation gauge began to register an above-normal reading. He sought in all directions and saw the crater far off ahead. "That's it," he heard her say. "You've

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got to leave the road there. Bear to the right and go around that way when you get there."

"I'll do that thing."

He heard gunshots from behind him, for the first time that day, and though he adjusted the cross-hairs he did not fire his own weapons. The distance was still too great.

"You must have cut them in half," she said, staring into the screen. "More than that. They're a tough bunch, though."

"I gather," and he plowed the field of mists and checked his supply of grenades for the launcher and saw that he was running low.

He swung off the road to his right when he began bumping along over fractured concrete. The radiation level was quite high by then. The crater was slightly more than a thousand yards to his left.

The lights to his rear fanned out, grew brighter. He drew a bead on the brightest and fired. It went out.

"There's another down," he remarked, as they raced across the hard-baked plain.

The rains came more heavily, and he sighted on another light and fired. It, too, went out. Now, though he heard the sounds of their weapons about him once again.

He switched to his right-hand guns and saw the cross-hairs leap into life on that screen. As three vehicles moved in to flank him from that direction, he opened up and cut them down. There was more firing at his back, and he ignored it as he negotiated the way.

"I count twenty-seven lights," Cornelia said.

Tanner wove his way across a field of boulders. He lit another cigarette.

Five minutes later, they were running on both sides of him. He had held back again for that moment, to conserve ammunition and to be sure of his targets. He fired then, though, at every light within range, and he floored the accelerator and swerved around rocks.

"Five of them are down," she said, but he was listening to the gunfire.

He launched a grenade to the rear, and when he tried to launch a second there came only a clicking sound from the control. He launched one to either side and then paused for a second.

"If they get close enough, I'll show them some fire," he said, and they continued on around the crater.

He fired only at individual targets then, when he was certain they were within range. He took two more before he struck the broken roadbed.

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"Keep running parallel to it," she told him. "There's a trail here. You can't drive on that stuff till another mile or so."

Shots ricocheted from off his armored sides, and he continued to return the fire. He raced along an alleyway of twisted trees, like those he had seen near other craters, and the mists hung like pennons about their brances. He heard the rattle of the increasing rains.

When we hit the roadway once again, he regarded the lights to his rear and asked, "How many do you count now?"

"It looks like around twenty. How are we doing?"

"I'm just worried about the tires. They can take a lot, but they can be shot out. The only other thing that bothers me is that a stray shot might clip one of the 'eyes.' Outside of that we're bullet-proof enough. Even if they manage to stop us, they'll have to pry us out."

The bikes drew near once again, and he saw the bright flashes and heard the reports of the riders' guns.

"Hold tight," he said, and he hit the brakes and they skidded on the wet pavement.

The lights grew suddenly bright, and he unleashed his rear flame. As some bikes skirted him, he cut in the side flames and held them that way.

Then he took his foot off the brake and floored the accelerator without waiting to assess the damage he had done.

They sped ahead, and Tanner heard Cornelia's laughter.

"God! You're taking them, Hell! You're taking the whole damn club!"

"It ain't that much fun," he said. Then, "See any lights?"

She watched for a time, said, "No," then said, "Three," then, "Seven," and finally, "Thirteen."

Tanner said, "Damn."

The radiation level fell and there came crashes amid the roaring overhead. A light fall of gravel descended for perhaps half a minute, along with the rain.

"We're running low," he said.

"On what?"

"Everything: Luck, fuel, ammo. Maybe you'd have been better off if I'd left you where I found you."

"No," she said. "I'm with you, the whole line."

"Then you're nuts," he said. "I haven't been hurt yet. When I am, it might be a different tune."

"Maybe," she said. "Wait and hear how I sing."

He reached out and squeezed her thigh.

"Okay, Corny. You've been okay so far. Hang onto that piece, and we'll see what happens."

He reached for another ciga-

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rette, found the pack empty, cursed. He gestured toward a compartment, and she opened it and got him a fresh pack. She tore it open and lit him one.

"Thanks."

"Why're they staying out of range?"

"Maybe they're just going to pace us. I don't know."

Then the fogs began to lift. By the time Tanner had finished his cigarette, the visibility had improved greatly. He could make out the dark forms crouched atop their bikes, following, following, nothing more.

"If they just want to keep us company, then I don't care," he said. "Let them."

But there came more gunfire after a time, and he heard a tire go. He slowed, but continued. He took careful aim and strafed them. Several fell.

More gunshots sounded from behind. Another tire blew, and he hit the brakes and skidded, turning about as he slowed. When he faced them, he shot his anchors, to hold him in place, and he discharged his rockets, one after another, at a level parallel to the road. He opened up with his guns and sprayed them as they veered off and approached him from the sides. Then he opened fire to the left. Then the right.

He emptied the right-hand guns, then switched back to the left. He launched the remaining grenades.

The gunfire died down, except for five sources — three to his left and two to his right — coming from somewhere within the trees that lined the road now. Broken bikes and bodies lay behind him, some still smouldering. The pavement was potted and cracked in many places.

He turned the car and proceeded ahead on six wheels.

"We're out of ammo, Corny," he told her.

"Well, we took an awful lot of them . . . ."

"Yeah."

As he drove on, he saw five bikes move onto the road. They stayed a good distance behind him, but they stayed.

He tried the radio, but there was no response. He hit the brakes and stopped, and the bikes stopped, too, staying well to the rear.

"Well, at least they're scared of us. They think we still have teeth."

"We do," she said.

"Yeah, but not the ones they're thinking about."

"Better yet."

"Glad I met you," said Tanner. "I can use an optimist. There must be a pony, huh?"

She nodded; he put it into gear

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and started forward abruptly.

The motorcycles moved ahead also, and they maintained a safe distance. Tanner watched them in the screens and cursed them as they followed.

After awhile they drew nearer again. Tanner roared on for half an hour, and the remaining five edged closer and closer.

When they drew near enough, they began to fire, rifles resting on their handlebars.

Tanner heard several low ricochets, and then another tire went out.

He stopped once more, and the bikes did, too, remaining just out of range of his flames. He cursed and ground ahead again. The car wobbled as he drove, listing to the left. A wrecked pickup truck stood smashed against a tree to his right, its hunched driver a skeleton, its windows smashed and tires missing. Half a sun now stood in the heavens, reaching after nine o'clock; fog-ghosts drifted before them, and the dark band in the sky undulated, and more rain fell from it, mixed with dust and small stones and bits of metal. Tanner said, "Good" as the pinging sounds began, and, "Hope it gets a lot worse," and his wish came true as the ground began to shake and the blue light began in the north. There came a booming within the roar, and there were several answering crashes as heaps of rubble appeared to his right. "Hope the next one falls right on our buddies back there," he said.

He saw an orange glow ahead and to his right. It had been there for several minutes, but he had not become conscious of it until just then.

"Volcano," she said when he indicated it. "It means we've got another sixty-five, seventy miles to go."

He could not tell whether any more shooting was occurring. The sounds coming from overhead and around him were sufficient to mask any gunfire, and the fall of gravel upon the car covered any ricocheting rounds. The five headlights to his rear maintained their pace.

"Why don't they give up?" he said. "They're taking a pretty bad beating."

"They're used to it," she replied, "and they're riding for blood, which makes a difference."

Tanner fetched the .357 Magnum from the door clip and passed it to her. "Hang onto this, too," he said, and he found a box of ammo in the second compartment and, "Put these in your pocket," he added. He stuffed ammo for the .45 into his own jacket. He adjusted the hand grenades upon his belt.

Then the five headlights be-

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hind him suddenly became four, and the others slowed, grew smaller. "Accident, I hope," he remarked.

They sighted the mountain, a jag-topped cone bleeding fires upon the sky. They left the road and swung far to the left, upon a well marked trail. It took twenty minutes to pass the mountain, and by then he sighted their pursuers once again — four lights to the rear, gaining slowly.

He came upon the road once more and hurried ahead across the shaking ground. The yellow lights moved through the heavens; and heavy, shapeless objects, some several feet across, crashed to the earth about them. The car was buffeted by winds, listed as they moved, would not proceed above forty miles an hour. The radio contained only static.

Tanner rounded a sharp curve, hit the brake, turned off his lights, pulled the pin from a hand grenade and waited with his hand upon the door.

When the lights appeared in the screen, he flung the door wide, leaped down and hurled the grenade through the abrasive rain.

He was into the cab and moving again before he heard the explosion, before the flash accurred upon his screen.

The girl laughed almost hysterically as the car moved ahead.

"You got 'em, Hell, You got 'em!" she cried.

Tanner took a drink from her flask, and she finished its final brown mouthful. He lit them cigarettes.

The road grew cracked, pitted, slippery. They topped a high rise and headed downhill. The fog thickened as they descended.

Lights appeared before him, and he readied the flame. There were no hostilities, however, as he passed a truck headed in the other direction. Within the next half hour he passed two more.

There came more lightning, and fist-sized rocks began to fall. Tanner left the road and sought shelter within a grove of high trees. The sky grew completely black, losing even its blue aurora.

They waited for three hours, but the storm did not let up. One by one, the four view-screens went dead and the fifth only showed the blackness beneath the car. Tanner's last sight in the rearview screen was of a huge splintered tree with a broken, swaying branch that was about ready to fall off. There were several terrific crashes upon the hood and the car shook with each. The roof above their heads was deeply dented in three places. The lights grew dim, then bright again. The radio would not produce even static any more.

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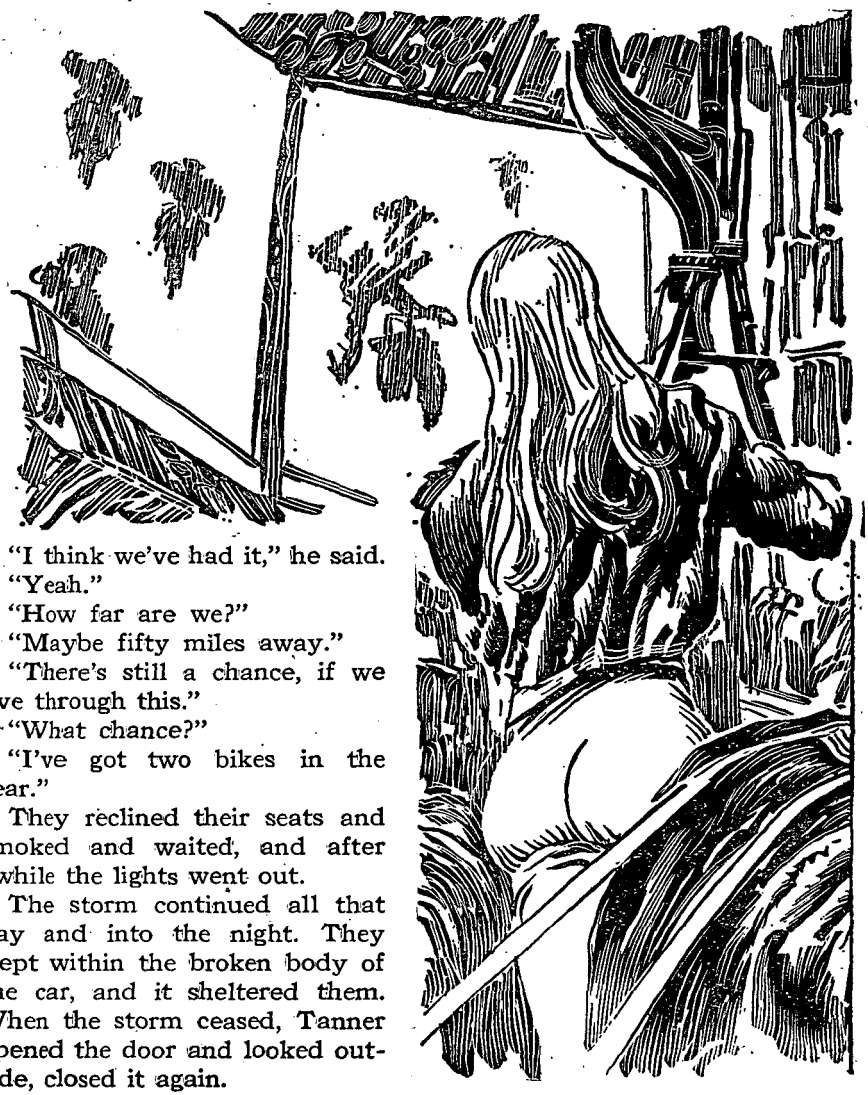

"I think we've had it," he said.

"Yeah."

"How far are we?"

"Maybe fifty miles away."

"There's still a chance, if we live through this."

"What chance?"

"I've got two bikes in the rear."

They reclined their seats and smoked and waited, and after awhile the lights went out.

The storm continued all that day and into the night. They slept within the broken body of the car, and it sheltered them. When the storm ceased, Tanner opened the door and looked outside, closed it again.

"We'll wait till morning," he

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said, and she held his Hell-printed hand, and they slept.

XVI

In the morning, Tanner walked back through the mud and the fallen branches, the rocks and the dead fishes, and he opened the rear compartment and unbolted the bikes. He fueled them and checked them out and wheeled them down the ramp.

He crawled into the back of the cab then and removed the rear seat. Beneath it, in the storage compartment, was the large aluminum chest that was his cargo. It was bolted shut. He lifted it, carried it out to his bike.

"That the stuff?" she asked.

He nodded and placed it on the ground.

"I don't know how the stuff is stored, if it's refrigerated in there or what," he said, "but it ain't too heavy that I might not be able to get it on the back of my bike. There's straps in the far right compartment. Go get 'em and give me a hand — and get me my pardon out of the middle compartment. It's in a big cardboard envelope."

She returned with these things and helped him secure the container on the rear of his bike.

He wrapped extra straps around his left bicep, and they wheeled the machines to the road.

"We'll have to take it kind of slow," he said, and he slung the rifle over his right shoulder, drew on his gloves and kicked his bike to life.

She did the same with hers, and they moved forward, side by side along the highway.

After they had been riding for perhaps an hour, two cars passed them, heading west. In the rear seats of both there were children, who pressed their faces to the glass and watched them as they went by. The driver of the second car was in his shirtsleeves, and he wore a black shoulder holster.

The sky was pink, and there were three black lines that looked

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as if they could be worth worrying about. The sun was a rose-tinted silvery thing, and pale, but Tanner still had to raise his goggles against it.

The pack was riding securely, and Tanner leaned into the dawn and thought about Boston. There was a light mist on the foot of every hill, and the air was cool and moist. Another car passed them. The road surface began to improve.

It was around noontime when he heard the first shot above the thunder of their engines. At first he thought it was a backfire, but it came again, and Corny cried out and swerved off the road and struck a boulder.

Tanner cut to the left, braking, as two more shots rang about him, and he leaned his bike against a tree and threw himself flat. A shot struck near his head and he could tell the direction from which it had come. He crawled into a ditch and drew off his right glove. He could see his girl lying where she had fallen, and there was blood on her breast. She did not move.

He raised the 30:06 and fired.

The shot was returned, and he moved to his left.

It had come from a hill about two hundred feet away, and he thought he saw the rifle's barrel.

He aimed at it and fired again.

The shot was returned, and he wormed his way further left. He crawled perhaps fifteen feet until he reached a pile of rubble he could crouch behind. Then he pulled the pin on a grenade, stood and hurled it.

He threw himself flat as another shot rang out, and he took another grenade into his hand.

There was a roar and a rumble and a mighty flash, and the junk fell about him as he leaped to his feet and threw the second one, taking better aim this time.

After the second explosion, he ran forward with his rifle in his hands, but it wasn't necessary.

He only found a few small pieces of the man, and none at all of his rifle.

He returned to Cornelia.

She wasn't breathing, and her heart had stopped beating, and he knew what that meant.

He carried her back to the ditch in which he had lain and he made it deeper by digging, using his hands.

He laid her down in it and he covered her with the dirt. Then he wheeled her machine over, set the kickstand, and stood it upon the grave. With his knife, he scratched upon the fender: *Her name was Cornelia and I don't know how old she was or where she came from or what her last name was but she was Hell Tanner's girl and I love her* Then he

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went back to his own machine, started it and drove ahead. Boston was maybe thirty miles away.

XVII

He drove along, and after a time he heard the sound of another bike. A Harley cut onto the road from the dirt path to his left, and he couldn't try running away from it because he couldn't speed with the load he bore. So he allowed himself to be paced.

After awhile, the rider of the other bike — a tall, thin man with a flaming beard — drew up alongside him, to the left. He smiled and raised his right hand and let it fall and then gestured with his head.

Tanner braked and came to a halt. Redbeard was right beside him when he did. He said, "Where you going, man?"

"Boston."

"What you got in the box?"

"Like, drugs."

"What kind?" and the man's eyebrows arched and the smile came again onto his lips.

"For the plague they got going there."

"Oh. I thought you meant the other kind." "Sorry."

The man held a pistol in his right hand and he said, "Get off your bike."

Tanner did this, and the man raised his left hand and another man came forward from the brush at the side of the road. "Wheel this guy's bike about two hundred yards up the highway," he said, "and park it in the middle. Then take your place."

"What's the bit?" Tanner asked.

The man ignored the question. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Hell's the name," he replied. "Hell Tanner."

"Go to hell."

Tanner shrugged.

"You ain't Hell Tanner."

Tanner drew off his right glove and extended his fist.

"There's my name."

"I don't believe it," said the man, after he had studied the tattoo.

"Have it your way, citizen."

"Shut up!" and he raised his left hand once more, now that the other man had parked the machine on the road and returned to a place somewhere within the trees to the right.

In response to his gesture, there was movement within the brush.

Bikes were pushed forward by their riders, and they lined the road, twenty or thirty on either side.

"There you are," said the man. "My name's Big Brother."

"Glad to meet you."

"You know what you're going to do, mister?"

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"I can really just about guess."

"You're going to walk up to your bike and claim it."

Tanner smiled.

"How hard's that going to be?"

"No trouble at all. Just start walking. Give me your rifle first, though."

Big Brother raised his hand again, and one by one the engines came to life.

"Okay," he said. "Now."

"You think I'm crazy, man?"

"No. Start walking. Your rifle."

Tanner unslung it and he continued the arc. He caught Big Brother beneath his red beard, and he felt the bullet go into him. Then he dropped the weapon and hauled forth a grenade, pulled the pin and tossed it amid the left side of the gauntlet. Before it exploded, he'd pulled the pin on another and thrown it to his right. By then, though, vehicles were moving forward, heading toward him.

He fell upon the rifle and shouldered it in a prone firing position. As he did this, the first explosion occurred. He was firing before the second one went off.

He dropped three of them, then got to his feet and scrambled, firing from the hip.

He made it behind Big Brother's fallen bike and fired from there. Big Brother was still fallen, too. When the rifle was empty, he didn't have time to reload. He fired the .45 four times before a tire chain brought him down.

He awoke to the roaring of the engines. They were circling him. When he got to his feet, a handlebar knocked him down again.

Two bikes were moving about him, and there were many dead people upon the road.

He struggled to rise again, was knocked off his feet.

Big Brother rode one of the bikes, and a guy he hadn't seen rode the other.

He crawled to the right, and there was pain in his fingertips as the tires passed over them.

But he saw a rock and waited till a driver was near. Then he stood again and threw himself upon the man as he passed, the rock he had seized rising and falling, once, in his right hand. He was carried along as this occurred, and as he fell he felt the second bike strike him.

There were terrible pains in his side, and his body felt broken, but he reached out even as this occurred and caught hold of a strut on the side of the bike and was dragged along by it.

Before he had been dragged ten feet, he had drawn his SS dagger from his boot. He struck upward and felt a thin metal wall give way. Then his hands came loose, and he fell and he smelled

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the gasoline. His hand dove into his jacket pocket and came out with the Zippo.

He had struck the tank on the side of Big Brother's bike, and it jetted forth its contents on the road. Twenty feet ahead, Big Brother was turning.

Tanner held the lighter, the lighter with the raised skull of enamel, wings on either side of it. His thumb spun the wheel and the sparks leapt forth, then the flame. He tossed it into the stream of petrol that lay before him, and the flames raced away, tracing a blazing trail upon the concrete.

Big Brother had turned and was bearing down upon him when he saw what had happened. His eyes widened, and his red-framed smile went away.

He tried to leap off his bike, but it was too late.

The exploding gas tank caught him, and he went down with a piece of metal in his head and other pieces elsewhere.

Flames splashed over Tanner, and he beat at them feebly with his hands.

He raised his head above the blazing carnage and let it fall again. He was bloody and weak and so very tired. He saw his own machine, standing still undamaged on the road ahead.

He began crawling toward it.

When he reached it, he threw himself across the saddle and lay there for perhaps ten minutes. He vomited twice, and his pains became a steady pulsing.

After perhaps an hour, he mounted the bike and brought it to life.

He rode for half a mile and then dizziness and the fatigue hit him.

He pulled off to the side of the road and concealed his bike as best he could. Then he lay down upon the bare earth and slept.

XVIII

When he awoke, he felt dried blood upon his side. His left hand ached and was swollen. All four fingers felt stiff, and it hurt to try to bend them. His head throbbed and there was a taste of gasoline within his mouth. He was too sore to move, for a long while. His beard had been singed, and his right eye was swollen almost shut.

"Corny . . . ." he said, then, "Damn!"

Everything came back, like the contents of a powerful dream suddenly spilled into his consciousness.

He began to shiver, and there were mists all around him. It was very dark, and his legs were cold; the dampness had soaked completely through his denims.

In the distance, he heard a ve-

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hicle pass. It sounded like a car.

He managed to roll over, and he rested his head on his forearm. It seemed to be night, but it could be a black day.

As he lay there, his mind went back to his prison cell. It seemed almost a haven now; and he thought of his brother Denny, who must also be hurting at this moment. He wondered if he had any cracked ribs himself. It felt like it. And he thought of the monsters of the southwest and of dark-eyed Greg, who had tried to chicken out. Was he still living? His mind circled back to L.A. and the old Coast, gone, gone forever now, after the Big Raid. Then Corny walked past him, blood upon her breasts, and he chewed his beard and held his eyes shut very tight. They might have made it together in Boston. How far, now?

He got to his knees and crawled until he felt something high and solid. A tree. He sat with his back to it, and his hand sought the crumpled cigarette pack within his jacket. He drew one forth, smoothed it, then remembered that his lighter lay somewhere back on the highway. He sought through his pockets and found a damp matchbook. The third one lit. The chill went out of his bones as he smoked, and a wave of fever swept over him. He coughed as he was unbuttoning his collar, and it seemed that he tasted blood.

His weapons were gone, save for the lump of a single grenade at his belt.

Above him, in the darkness, he heard the roaring. After six puffs, the cigarette slipped from his fingers and sizzled out upon the damp mold. His head fell forward, and there was darkness within.

There might have been a storm. He didn't remember. When he awoke, he was lying on his right side, the tree to his back. A pink afternoon sun shone down upon him, and the mists were blown away. From somewhere, he heard the sound of a bird. He managed a curse, then realized how dry his throat was. He was suddenly burnt with a terrible thirst.

There was a clear puddle about thirty feet away. He crawled to it and drank his fill. It grew muddy as he did so.

Then he crawled to where his bike lay hidden and stood beside it. He managed to seat himself upon it, and his hands shook as he lit a cigarette.

It must have taken him an hour to reach the roadway, and he was panting heavily by then. His watch had been broken, so he didn't know the hour. The sun was already lowering at his back when he started out. The winds

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whipped about him, insulating his consciousness within their burning flow. His cargo rode securely behind him. He had visions of someone opening it and finding a batch of broken bottles. He laughed and cursed, alternately.

Several cars passed him, heading in the other direction. He had not seen any heading toward the city. The road was in good condition and he began to pass buildings that seemed in a good state of repair, though deserted. He did not stop. This time he determined not to stop for anything, unless he was stopped.

The sun fell farther, and the sky dimmed before him. There were two black lines swaying in the heavens. Then he passed a sign that told him he had 18 miles farther to go. Ten minutes later he switched on his light.

Then he topped a hill and slowed before he began its descent.

There were lights below him and in the distance.

As he rushed forward, the winds brought to him the sound of a single bell, tolling over and over within the gathering dark. He sniffed a remembered thing upon the air: it was the salt-tang of the sea.

The sun was hidden behind the hill as he descended, and he rode within the endless shadow. A single star appeared on the far horizon, between the two black belts.

Now there were lights within shadows that he passed, and the buildings moved closer together. He leaned heavily on the handlebars, and the muscles of his shoulders smouldered beneath his jacket. He wished that he had a crash helmet, for he felt increasingly unsteady.

He must almost be there. Where would he head once he hit the city proper? They had not told him that.

He shook his head to clear it.

The street he drove along was deserted. There were no traffic sounds that he could hear. He blew his horn, and its echoes rolled back upon him.

There was a light on in the building to his left.

He pulled to a stop, crossed the sidewalk and banged on the door. There was no response from within. He tried the door and found it locked. A telephone would mean he could end his trip right there.

What if they were all dead inside? The thought occurred to him that just about everybody could be dead by now. He decided to break in. He returned to his bike for a screwdriver, then went to work on the door.

He heard the gunshot and the sound of the engine at approximately the same time.

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He turned around quickly, his back against the door, the hand grenade in his gloved right fist.

"Hold it!" called out a loudspeaker on the side of the black car that approached. "That shot was a warning! The next one won't be!"

Tanner raised his hands to a level with his ears, his right one turned to conceal the grenade. He stepped forward to the curb beside his bike when the car drew up.

There were two officers in the car, and the one on the passenger side held a .38 pointed at Tanner's middle.

"You're under arrest," he said. "Looting."

Tanner nodded as the man stepped out of the car. The driver came around the front of the vehicle, a pair of handcuffs in his hand.

"Looting," the man with the gun repeated. "You'll pull a real stiff sentence."

"Stick your hands out here, boy," said the second cop, and Tanner handed him the grenade pin.

The man stared at it, dumbly, for several seconds, then his eyes shot to Tanner's right hand.

"God! He's got a bomb!" said the man with the gun.

Tanner smiled, then, "Shut up and listen!" he said. "Or else shoot me and we'll all go together when we go. I was trying to get to a telephone. That case on the back of my bike is full of Haffikine antiserum. I brought it from L.A."

"You didn't run the Alley on that bike!"

"No, I didn't. My car is dead somewhere between here and Albany, and so are a lot of folks who tried to stop me. Now you better take that medicine and get it where it's supposed to go."

"You on the level, mister?"

"My hand is getting very tired. I am not in good shape." Tanner leaned on his bike. "Here."

He pulled his pardon out of his jacket and handed it to the officer with the handcuffs. "That's my pardon," he said. "It's dated just last week and you can see it was made out in California."

The officer took the envelope and opened it. He withdrew the paper and studied it. "Looks real," he said. "So Brady made it through . . . "

"He's dead," Tanner said. "Look, I'm hurtin'. Do something!"

"My God! Hold it tight! Get in the car and sit down! It'll just take a minute to get the case off and we'll roll. We'll drive to the river and you can throw it in. Squeeze real hard!"

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They unfastened the case and put it in the back of the car. They rolled down the right front window, and Tanner sat next to it with his arm on the outside.

The siren screamed, and the pain crept up Tanner's arm to his shoulder. It would be very easy to let go.

"Where do you keep you river?" he asked.

"Just a little farther. We'll be there in no time."

"Hurry," Tanner said.

"That's the bridge up ahead. We'll ride out onto it, and you throw it off — as far out as you can."

"Man, I'm tired! I'm not sure I can make it . . . ."

"Hurry, Jerry!"

"I am, damn it! We ain't got wings!"

"I feel kind of dizzy, too . . . ."

They tore out onto the bridge, and the tires screeched as they halted. Tanner opened the door slowly. The driver's had already slammed shut.

He staggered, and they helped him to the railing. He sagged against it when they released him.

"I don't think I — "

Then he straightened, drew back his arm and hurled the grenade far out over the waters.

He grinned, and the explosion followed, far beneath them, and for a time the waters were troubled.

The two officers sighed and Tanner chuckled.

"I'm really okay," he said. "I just faked it to bug you."

"Why you — !"

Then he collapsed, and they saw the pallor of his face within the beams of their lights.

XIX

The following spring, on the day of its unveiling in Boston Common, when it was discovered that someone had scrawled obscene words on the statue of Hell Tanner, no one thought to ask the logical candidate why he had done it, and the next day it was too late, because he had cut out without leaving a forwarding address. Several cars were reported stolen that day, and one was never seen again in Boston.

So they re-veiled his statue, bigger than life, astride a great bronze Harley, and they cleaned him up for hoped-for posterity. But coming upon the Common, the winds still break about him and the heavens still throw garbage. —ROGER ZELAZNY

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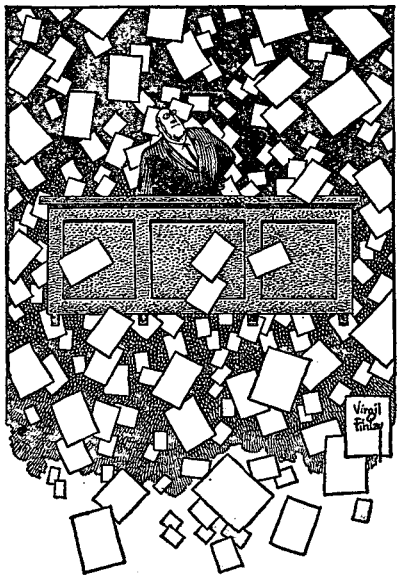
Non-Fact Article



BURO

POULFINCH'S

Illustrated by FINLAY

Short history of the Old Gods of Earth — and why we are so glad that they are forgotten!

Description of the midtwentieth-century American pantheon is made difficult by a paucity of literary references. There can be no doubt that it existed. The merest glance at the history and sociology of the epoch proves that men had found monotheism rather too trying and reverted to a more traditional form of religion. But exact dogma was frowned on — a rule known as Nonsectarianism — and this prevented any Hesiod or Snorri from writing an account of the gods and the myths concerning them.

Nevertheless, indirect evidence is abundant, and on its basis we can make a partial reconstruction of the prevalent beliefs. Like other polytheisms, this one was often vague and inconsistent, so that the status of the lesser deities in particular tends to be obscure. But scholars feel assured that the divine family numbered the usual twelve.

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MYTHOLOGY

by POUL ANDERSON

ATOMIKA

BURO

Creator and ruler of the universe, father of all the rest except Bom (*q.v.*), Buro was the god of government. As such, he received the special devotion of politicians, civil servants and the common people. He it was who kept the stars in their courses and the Earth in order, regulated the seasons, presided over marriages and education, brought forth crops and cattle and oil wells. In his name deserts were reclaimed, slums cleared, freeways built and wars waged. Since his priests controlled most of the national wealth, economics worked together with reverence to make his the most important cult.

At the same time, he shows the ambiguous character of several fellow divinities. Together with his dignity went a certain comic aspect. This may derive from legends about his rebellious youth, like the one in which he chopped down a sacred cherry tree, a possible echo of some ancient fertility rite. Or it may simply have arisen from the American custom of blaming him when anything went wrong. Whatever the reason, he was not believed to be absolutely infallible. Thus for example, the great alkali desert of Utah was said to have been constructed as a boondoggle; and the tale of Buro's magic printing press — which escaped his con-

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trol and is still spewing forth official forms — is well known.

On the whole, though, he was looked on as powerful, benevolent and, if not precisely wise, at least omniscient. His more devout worshippers excused the divine blunders by pointing out that he had divided the rule of the universe among his children and no president has ever quite mastered his bureaucrats. Originally he was depicted lean and white-bearded, in striped trousers and starry vest. But later he was more commonly imagined in the form of a stout, conservatively dressed man seated behand an enormous desk in the sky.

ATOMIKA

At first a local and rather minor figure, the goddess of science became in time second only to Buro. Tall, severely beautiful, frigidly virginal, she far surpassed him in arousing awe.

For hers were the secrets of the outermost cosmos and the innermost atom, life and death, beginnings and endings, alpha and omega, not to mention pi.

Through her priests, she revealed truth to men a piece at a time. But she did so with what was either unfathomable purpose or unhuman capriciousness; for she did not seem to care in the least whether a revelation would heal or harm, comfort or desolate. Furthermore, her pronouncements were couched in language which none could understand who had not served a long, arduous period of apprenticeship. Nor could these priests themselves be sure they had interpreted an oracular saying correctly; and a later revelation might well overturn a previous one.

As if this did not make their lives difficult enough, Atomika laid curses on them which are hard to comprehend in a goddess of reason. The most famous is no doubt the one embodied in the rule:

"He that publisheth not a sufficiency, he shall perish; yea, all grants shall be refused him, his contract shall not be renewed, he shall sink from the sight of his fellows even into the depths of the teachers' colleges, and his name shall vanish from the very footnotes."

Because the public was debarred from mysteries, yet stood in such an intense love-hate relationship to her and her priests, mediators were necessary. They were called popularizers, because they led the populace in worshipping her at a goodly distance from her temples. It is not known whether these services were rites of adoration or rather, in truth, of placation.

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TOOLSMITH

The god of engineers was much more understandable and likeable. Though he alone dared enter the palace of Atomika, he did so in order to blarney information out of her. Armed with this knowledge, he then proceeded to design and build. In time of peace he made things for civilian use, ranging from space rockets to self-opening beer cans. But in time of war his clangorous shops forged ever more terrible weapons.

Gusty and good-natured; possessed of incredible capacities for work, drink and lovemaking; a demon in a poker game; withal utterly dependable, and somewhat unimaginative outside his profession, he personified the best qualities of the ordinary man.

Hence the stories about him are legion. The tale of his expelling the snakes from Ireland was borrowed from the former religion, so that he might be the one who originated the worm drive. He set the Earth spinning because his new inertial navigation system required a reference plane. He invented the calculus as a practical joke on Atomika; it took her two centuries to find why it worked. He created the first sequoia when he needed an especially large van de Graff generator, the Columbia River to

TOOLSMITH

cool the Hanford nuclear reactor and the Grand Canyon for the hell of it. One could go on indefinitely.

He is shown as a burly, middle-aged man with hairy ears, holding a slide rule and seated on an oscilloscope.

KEEN

This was the god of success. He replaced earlier tutelary spirits of wealth when, between inflation and income tax, money ceased to have value in itself. Because of the American belief that one did or did not succeed in getting the most out of life and success required following appro-

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priate procedures, Keen became also the god of pleasure. The dual function was made clear in the numerous publications issued by his priests. His cult flourished especially among boys in late adolescence and junior executives (as mail clerks were then called).

Keen was the shrewdest of the gods. The stories are many about his financial manipulations, business ventures and creation of new fashions in dress and behavior. Yet there was nothing sinister about him. Contrariwise, he was extremely affable; his worshippers were commanded to address each other by their given names from the first moment of encounter. He was a mighty lover, indeed

KEEN

the male equivalent of Bunni (*q.v.*), and an all-around *bon vivant*. His house was by far the most luxurious in heaven, and his hospitality was unlimited.

Still, his was a stern code. In imitation of him, his devotees must be indefatigable workers, not only in the office but in bed. They had to memorize long lists of what was In and what was Out, which were changed almost daily. (Scholars are not agreed on the denotation of these two curious adjectives.) It was said that Keen himself never slept.

On that account, Buro appointed him watchman of the gods. He carried out this duty ably — but not in person. Instead, he got Toolsmith to design radar fences and electronic burglar alarms for heaven, then got the contract to build them for a company owned by himself.

His image is that of a brisk young man with a briefcase, attired in a modish business suit and executive-length socks.

BUNNI

The erotic goddess had nothing to do with hearth, home, or children. Those came under Buro's supervision and were not considered very interesting anyway. Bunni was the spirit of pure sex. As such, she was invoked by everyone from a high school girl

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BUNNI

who wanted to be noticed by some particularly cute boy to an aging man who had met an attractive woman and hoped it might do him some good.

Like other divinities, she had contradictory aspects. Sometimes she appeared in the guise of a teen-ager eager for defloration, sometimes as an infinitely experienced, though young, woman. But probably the latter phase predominated, since it was said that she had been married to nearly all the gods. A comic story, perhaps harking back to Greek legend, relates how she once went to bed with Brothergood (*q.v.*) and absent-mindedly forgot the incantation "I divorce him, I marry you, and we will live happily ever after." So Toolsmith was still her husband. But he, having a suspicion of what was about to happen, had prepared a bed with an optically flat surface. The lovers stuck to this and were unable to escape. Toolsmith called in the other gods for a good laugh before he released them.

On the whole, however, the cult of Bunni was taken with immense seriousness. She is usually represented nude, a cosmetic case in one hand and a contraceptive in the other. Her breasts are enormous but defy gravity by standing horizontally outward. Curiously, her posture is always such that the genitalia are not seen. This ma yhave given rise to the legend that she did not really have any.

JESU

Jesu was the god of Love, by which the Americans meant something vaguely like *philos* as opposed to the *eros* of Bunni. (They had no concept of *agape.*) He had been too prominent in the old religion to omit from the pantheon, but his less comfortable attributes were soon smoothed off.

Though frequently confused with Brothergood, Jesu was actually quite a different figure. He

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JESU

was in charge of communication and understanding between mortals. It was thought that when he bestowed his wisdom on the parties to a quarrel they saw at once that there was in fact no quarrel, that they were really in perfect agreement and had simply failed to make themselves clear. The belief is epitomized in a saying attributed to him: "We have met the enemy, and they are human beings just like us." His worship was often conjoined with that of Keen, since it was felt that an absence of inner conflict and self-doubt — a state of grace known as "positive thinking" — was essential to success.

Strictly speaking, he was not the god of the dead. The Americans tabooed mention of death. But he was supposed to operate a large pink-and-white motel in heaven where those who had temporarily been separated could, if they wished, find each other again in perfect health and eternal youth.

Funeral practices look so inconsistent with the above that some scholars maintain the Americans actually imagined the dead as inhabiting the grave. But such a conclusion does not follow. It is true that burial grounds (which were never called by any such name) were tastefully landscaped and had adjacent parking lots. It is true that corpses were embalmed, then laid in padded coffins that were supplied with Muzak and even, it is said, telephones. However, such rites prove little. They can just as well have been for purposes of sympathetic magic, to guarantee that Jesu would honor the credit cards of the dead.

He is depicted as a plump young man, neatly bearded, dressed in a white nylon robe.

BROTHERGOOD

This figure stands midway between Jesu and Kak (*q.v.*) and may have been intended to combine certain qualities of both. He was called the god of solidarity.

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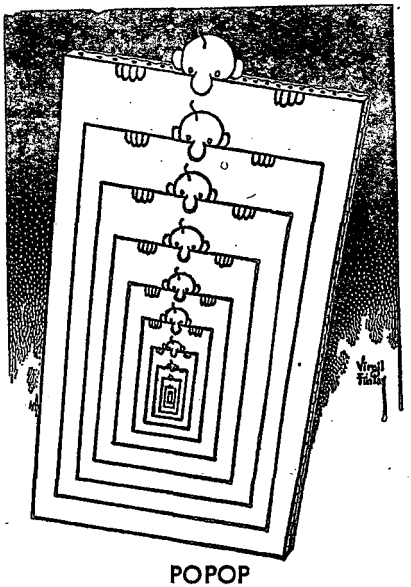
BROTHERGOOD

His role was not to eliminate conflict, nor to create it in the first place. In practice he exacerbated it. But in theory he was just the guardian and inspiration of people who marched together in a worthy cause. He infused them with fraternal spirit, assured them they would overcome, and laid his curse on any authority which tried to control them. The mass meetings, mass marches, mass singing and general mass enthusiasm of his devotees illustrate his affinities to Dionysus.

According to legend, when Buro brought him to trial on charges of disturbing the peace, Brothergood argued with great eloquence that the solidarity and self-sacrifice he inspired were civic virtues; that his followers meant well; and that any incidental damage brought reconstruction, which was good for business. He finished by singing a folk song so moving that the gods burst into tears and acquitted him. This story appears to be a poetic treatment of the fact that men cannot endure an ordered society for long without an emotional safety valve.

The representations of Brothergood are as many as the causes he led. Thus he may be seen in overalls, carrying a lunchbox; in dirty jeans, sweater, sandals and beard, carrying a guitar; in the uniform of some paramilitary or-



POPOP

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ganization; in hood and white sheet; or even in the garb of a solid, Buro-worshipping citizen demonstrating in support of the government.

POPOP

About this god of art, music and dance, the less said the better.

FARWAY

Like Toolsmith, the god of explorations is a rather attractive personality. He was invoked by men risking their lives in unknown parts of the world, in the depths of the sea and in outer space. He instilled in them the wish to conquer, not their fellow men but blind nature; to discover truth on a more human level than that of science (though Farway's relationship with Atomika was excellent); to prove their own worth and thus the worth of mankind as a whole. He maintained a lodge in heaven, the Hall of Fame, where one could meet all who had ever ventured bravely forth.

FARAWAY

Nevertheless he was not really a romantic figure. The stories about him lay constant emphasis on the care with which he organized his own expeditions. He had nothing but contempt for recklessness. Though he could fight when need arose, he regretted that need. He lived frugally and soberly, keeping himself fit, was happily married to an obscure but sympathetic divinity known as Lonelyhearts, and was said to be the only god who had never frolicked with Bunni.

On this account, and perhaps also because of confusion involving the Hall of Fame, it is hard to separate him from the god of athletics. Often they appear to be identical; but there are some references to the latter under the name of Casey. Since exploration and sport both involve physical exertion and advance planning, and since the motivations behind them are very similar, we can understand why the Americans

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were not quite sure whether they had here one god or two.

He is usually shown as tall, muscular, and handsome, with a little gray at the temples. He holds a pair of binoculars, and a map or an astronautical chart is spread out before him. In the background is an American flag and sometimes a baseball bat.

KAK

KAK

In many respects, the god of ideologies corresponds to the Norse Loki. He had no cult; he was a notorious troublemaker; at the end of the world he might well side with the enemies of the gods; but he was occasionally useful and so could not be expelled from heaven.

He it was who presented the first man and woman with a locked box. He told them they must on no account open it, but knew very well they would. And when they did, out flew a cloud of noxious Isms which have plagued the world ever since. Fortunately Buro had placed one more in the box, which now emerged to undo some of the harm: Americanism.

Brothergood was especially susceptible to the wiles of Kak, but now and then others were also persuaded to assist him. A myth relates that once Kak changed himself into a beautiful woman on whom Toolsmith, all unknowing, begot Bom. Kak was forever mocking the gods, pointing out flaws in their works and insisting he could do their tasks better. Yet in times of crisis he seemed to be indispensable. Though the Americans, as said, did not officially worship him, he appears to have had a considerable unrecognized following; and the devotees of other gods often attended his dark rites too when a war was going on.

He is described as lean and burning-eyed, with a weakness for gaudy uniforms.

LIBERTY

The goddess of freedom was

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much loved in the early days of the Republic. Indeed, she is the only one whom we definitely know had a statues erected to her. By the middle twentieth century, however, the average citizen took her for granted and rarely bothered to observe her festival, which came about two weeks after the summer solstice. At last the practice of shooting fireworks in her honor was forbidden.

She continued to be called on by those whom Kak had touched, whether with his right hand or his left. But this tended to degrade her worship still further. The story arose that she had once been a virgin, but was repeatedly raped by Brothergood.

LIBERTY

Perhaps this is why she is represented with a crown of thorns.

BOM

Authorities dispute whether Bom should be included in the pantheon. He has been called the god of war, but in point of fact the Americans had none. They considered war, like death, to be an abnormal, deplorable and correctible state of affairs. They did not require a military god to defend them; this was the task of Buro and Toolsmith. The popular mind abhorred Bom. It was considered unlucky to mention his name. (As a contemporary poet said, "Ignore it and maybe it'll go away.") If matters ever went so far as the end of the world, Bom would lead the forces of chaos and might well prevail.

Still, a minority opinion held that there was much to be said for him. This did not come from Jesu, many of whose followers identified Bom with the absolute evil which they simultaneously denied had any existence. Rather, it was the view of certain political and military thinkers. Their supporters called them realists and their opponents called them fascists, a common swear word in those days.

The myth reflects this conflict. Early in his existence, Bom destroyed an especially virulent

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BOM

swarm of Isms. Thereafter most of the gods wanted to chain him in the underworld, for he might turn on them at any moment.

But Kak argued that many dangerous Isms remained alive and only Bom had the power to keep them at their distance. Since the Isms were Kak's own creation (always excepting Americanism), the argument looks specious. But it was accepted, because none of the other gods could think of any way to overcome Bom and certain of them hoped he might be persuaded to help them in various projects.

Thus he continued to live in heaven. He was not invited to parties, but he did sit in the divine councils, usually in a chilling silence, occasionally voicing a brutal sarcasm.

He is depicted as huge and torpedo-shaped, with a Roman helmet on his head, and badly in need of a shave.

— POUL ANDERSON

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

FORECAST

Next issue brings Poul (or, as we now sometimes call him, Poulfinch) Anderson back with a good-sized novel that, to our surprise, we are managing to print complete in one issue. *Outpost of Empire*, it's called; and it has to do with warfare on the marches of a galactic civilization. You say you've read a story about that? Well, probably so. But this kind of warfare is special: it is fought with the ultimate in biological weapons, including that armorarium built into the body of Man himself . . . Or, rather, in this case, Woman. . . .

Larry Niven is with us again with a novelette called *Handicap*. There's an intelligent race, you see. Its IQ is human-sized, or a little better; but it has the problem of having evolved without manipulative organs. Can we communicate with creatures like that? More important, what good will it do us — or them?

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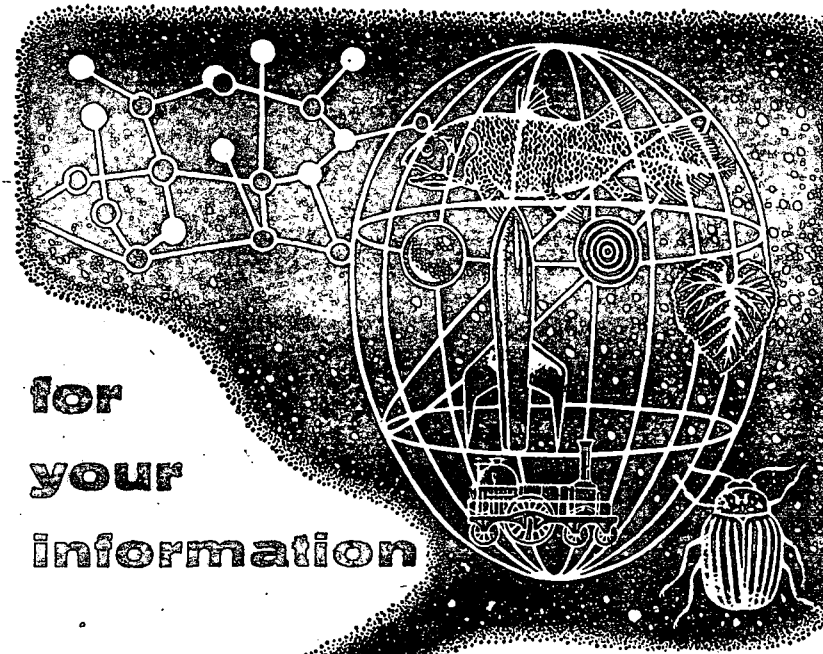
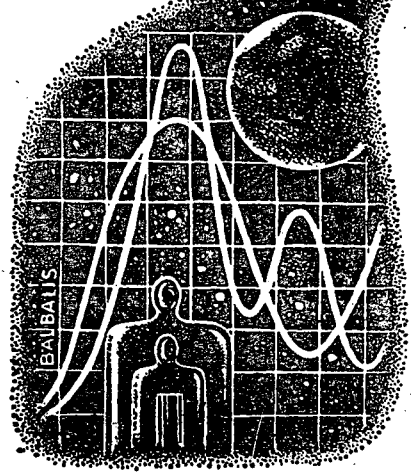


for your information

BY WILLY LEY



THE WORST OF ALL THE COMETS

Comets cause catastrophes Everybody in Christendon knew that at one time. But b now comet fear is probably re stricted to rural areas in Europ and, perhaps, our own Bible Bel We don't have to wonder abou the large non-Christian countrie of Asia and Africa because ther

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COMETA ORIEN-
TALIS,

Warhaffte vnd eygentliche Beschreibung deß newen Cometen/ so im November deß abgelauffenen 1618. Jahrs in Orient/ oder gegen Auffgang der Sonnen allhie erschienen/ vnd von menniglich gesehen worden.

Auß warhafften Astrologischen vnd Historischen Gründen menniglich zur Nachrichtung gestellt/

Durch

M. Gothardum Arthusium Dantiscanum, P.C. Histor. & Philo-Mathem. zu Franckfurt am Mayn.

2. Timoth. 3.

Instabunt tempora periculosa.

Franckfurt am Mayn/ bey Sigismundo Latomo.

Fig. 1. Title page of one of the many comet pamphlets that flooded Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Translation:* Cometa Orientalis: Short and proper Description of the new Comet, which during November of the preceding 1618 Year appeared in the Orient, that is in the direction of Sunrise and was seen by many. Reported on truthful Astrological & Historical grounds by Gotthard Arthusius, Professor of History and Philosophy-Mathematics at Frankfurt on the Main. — The Latin phrase below the picture is the opening sentence of the Second Epistle to Timothy, predicting perilous times.

never was any comet fear in those places. Comet fear was, surprising as it may sound, restricted to the Christian countries because it was part of Christian beliefs.

Like everything else comet fear grew up slowly; it reached its climax during the years from 1200 to 1650, when professors of Christian philosophy taught things that one would think to have been mere folklore among the illiterates of that period. I happen to have a beautiful example on hand, a 24-page pamphlet published in Frankfurt am Main in 1619, one year after the appearance of the comet of 1618. (Fig. 1.)

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Gotthard Arthusius, the author of the pamphlet, began with the assertion that the final battle against evil and the Day of Judgment must certainly be approaching.

"But because the larger portion of mankind in the world commits evil without regret or hesitation, and lives carelessly in the belief that nobody will learn about their evil ways or even inquire about them; therefore the Son of God does not rely only on the might of his words but from time to time puts other preachers on the high pulpit of his heaven and causes signs and miracles in the sun, the moon and the stars and ignites many a bright light in the clouds in order to wake people from their sinful sleep . . . . We have seen such a sign in our time for Almighty God has put a cruel torch in the sky and shown us a Comet with a very long and burning tail."

Scientifically speaking, Arthusius believed with Aristotle that a comet consisted of burning "vapors" in the upper air; but while Aristotle took the ignition of these vapors to be a natural process and probably accidental, the theologians, and especially the Protestant theologians of the era of comet fear, considered the ignition of these vapors to be literally an act of God.

"The Comet has been seen here," Arthusius continued, "on 18/28 November in the morning at 5 o'clock but before the Comet was ignited one did see a few rays in the morning sky in the precise place where the Comet-Star rose later and those rays might be compared to the messengers preceding an important personage."

The figure "18/28" does not mean that the comet was visible from the 18th to the 28th of November 1618; this was the time of transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar — it was November 18 to the adherents of the Julian calendar and November 28 of the Gregorian calendar. The actual period of visibility was 27 days. Of course the "rays" were the comet's tail that had happened to be visible first.

"The Comet rose in Scorpio in the 12th house, not far from the beautiful bright star named *Spica virginis* between which and Arcturus it shot its rays in the direction of the northern Pole . . . for the present moment one cannot really tell at which time it was first ignited . . . but I conclude for Astrological Reasons that it must have been the 26 Octob. of the Old, or 6 Novemb. of the New Calendar."

There follow about ten pages of calamities that were associated with comets: "From these and

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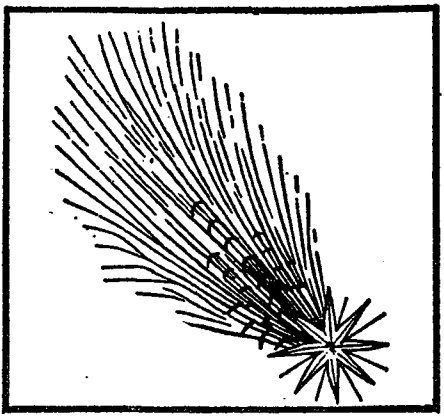

Fig. 2. The oldest known picture of a comet, from the Nuremberg chronicle for the year 684 A.D. This was one of the appearances of Halley's comet.

other examples it can be seen clearly that comets never appeared without great catastrophies."

If the good and pious burgher who bought the pamphlet expected enlightenment about the specific catastrophies that were to come he was going to be disappointed. Arthusius merely warned that one of the signs of comet madness was "an insatiable craving for innovations" and said that morning comets show their actions soon, while the consequences of evening comets are more slow in coming. Generally comets presage "earthquakes, floods, changes in river courses, hail storms, hot and dry weather, poor harvests, epidemics, war and treason and high prices."

This pamplet was written and printed at about the peak period of comet fear. But, as used to be said of fever, the peak was reached just before the decline. By 1700 thinking people had reached the conclusion that one could have bad weather, poor harvests, war and high prices without the aid of a comet. Theologians no longer pointed to comets as a sign that the end of the world was at hand; it had been done too often before. And astronomers by then knew that comets were not burning vapors in the atmospheres but bodies in space far beyond the moon. (Fig. 2.)

It was during the early years of the eighteenth century that Dr. Edmond Halley began collecting all the comet observations he could find in order to calculate their orbits. In compiling his list of the orbits of 24 "different" comets he noticed that four of these orbits, namely those of the comets of 1456, 1531, 1607 and 1682, were the same, and he drew the conclusion that this must have been four appearances of the same comet that approached the sun every 75 years. If this was so, that comet should return in 1758 — which, as everybody now knows, it did.

Halley's list of 24 orbits was published in 1705, and others studied it with care in hopes of

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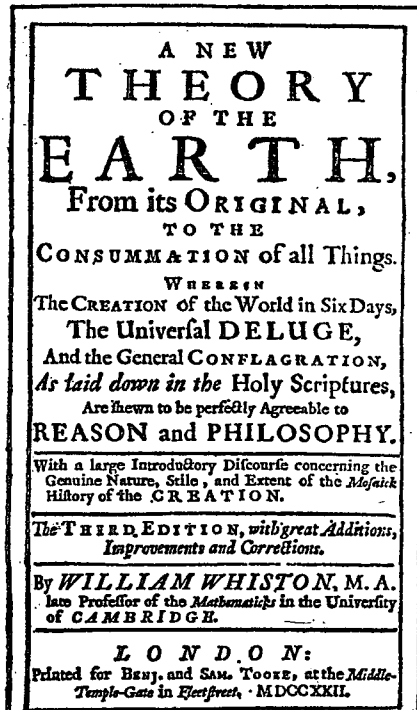

A NEW
THEORY
OF THE
EARTH,
From its ORIGINAL,
TO THE
CONSUMMATION of all Things.
WHEREIN
The CREATION of the World in Six Days,
The Universal DELUGE,
And the General CONFLAGRATION,
As laid down in the Holy Scriptures,
Are shewn to be perfectly Agreeable to
REASON and PHILOSOPHY.

With a large Introductory Discourse concerning the Genuine Nature, Stile, and Extent of the *Mosaick* History of the CREATION.

The THIRD EDITION, *with great Additions, Improvements and Corrections.*

By *WILLIAM WHISTON*, M. A.
late Professor of the *Mathematicks* in the University of *CAMBRIDGE*.

LONDON:
Printed for BENJ. and SAM. TOOKE, at the *Middle-Temple-Gate* in *Fleet-street*, MDCCXXII.

Fig. 3. Title page of William Whiston's book.

finding another periodicity. The Rev. William Whiston, a learned Anglican theologian and philosopher thought that he did: the orbits of the then recent great comet of 1680, of the comet of 1106 and that of 531 looked alike to him; the periodicity would be 574 years. Halley had noticed that too, but had rejected the conclusion for several reasons; while there seemed to be a periodicity the orbits were not sufficiently alike. But Whiston went ahead — that comet must have been visible in 43 B.C., in 541 B.C., in 1115 B.C., and so on, counting backward. And suddenly he saw that this comet *had* caused a catastrophe, in fact *the* catastrophe. He sat down and wrote a pamphlet with the title *The Cause of the Deluge Demonstrated* which appeared in 1711. After that he really went to work and expanded it into a 556-page book *A New Theory of the Earth* (Fig. 3.) It appeared in 1722 and in it rewrote the Book of Genesis.

Whiston's intention was to defend the Bible, specifically Genesis. But, he admitted, Genesis needs some explanation. While no doubt divinely inspired, the "sacred penman" wrote it so as to be understandable to the primitive agricultural Jews of his time. And because they were unable to grasp the concept of the astronomical universe, the universe is treated as it appears to men of this type, and Genesis deals with the creation of the earth only. Whiston felt no qualms in supposing that the universe was already in existence when the Lord made Earth habitable and created its animals and plants.

It is difficult to imagine a more repetitious and redundant

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piece of writing than this book; pruning the 556 pages down to about 300 pages would not only be easy, it would be an improvement. Still, in the space available here, I cannot repeat all his arguments. Only the highlights can be given, and any similarity to recent fantasies is coincidental.

Whiston pointed out that the gases surrounding the nucleus of a comet appear to be highly agitated; this to him was a visible chaos, the original state of the earth. Obviously there was some connection between and comets, or, as he phrased it:

"Tis very reasonable to believe, that a *Planet* is a *Comet* form'd into a regular and lasting Constitution, and plac'd at a proper distance from the Sun in a *Circular* Orbit, or one very little Eccentrical; and a *Comet* is a *Chaos, i.e., a Planet* unform'd, or in its primaeval state, plac'd in a very *Eccentrical* one."

Hence the prelude of the creation as described in Genesis must have consisted in making a comet assume about the orbit the Earth now has. But that planet to be did not yet rotate on its axis: "The *Annual Motion* of the Earth commenc'd at the beginning of the *Mosaick* Creation; yet its *Diurnal* Rotation did not till after the Fall of Man." With this assumption Whiston made each of the days of creation one year long and he defended himself against the reproach that he limited the power of the Creator. Of course, he said, the Lord, if He pleased, could have started and concluded the whole creation in one moment, but that is not what the Bible says. Moreover the soil is ordered to produce the plants; the seas are ordered to produce the creatures in them, and finally Adam is ordered to name the animals. The soil, the seas and Adam could not perform in an instant; they needed time.

In 1722, when Whiston wrote his book, the time elapsed since the first day, that is year, of creation was 5731 years, while 4070 years had gone by since the first day of the deluge. During the sixteen and a half centuries between creation and the deluge Mankind had multiplied enormously, because every individual lived for hundreds of years so that more than 500 million people perished when the deluge came. It was "on the 17th Day of the Second Month, from the Autumnal Equinox, or November 28 in the 2349th Year before the Christian Aera" that a great comet came close to the earth. When nearest its distance was 10,000 miles "and itself a little less than a Quarter of the bigness of the Earth; or about 6 times so big as the Moon; two very probable and easy *Hypotheses*."

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I can't find anything easy about this statement because the Rev. Whiston did not say what he meant by "bigness." If he had diameters in mind, six times the "bigness" of the moon makes about 1-3/4 Earth diameter. If he meant volumes, six times the volume of the moon is 31,560 million cubic miles which is only about 0.12 the volume of the Earth — but let's not quibble about the mathematics of spherical bodies.

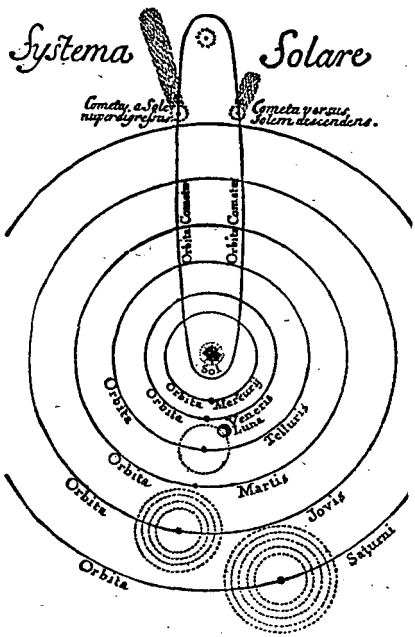

Fig. 4. Diagram of the orbit of "the Comet" from Whiston's book. At that time Saturn was still the outermost known planet.

At any event this comet was rich in water that poured down on the Earth; at the same time its gravitational attraction caused "all the fountains of the great deep" to open up. The addition of the water and the gravitation of the comet had two other effects. Before the deluge the year lasted 360 days; but days slightly shorter than the days at present. The additional water lengthened the day, and the attraction of the comet changed the originally circular orbit of the earth into an elliptical orbit which takes 365-1/4 days to complete. When the Earth is at perihelion early in January of each year — 91-1/2 million miles from the sun — it touches its former orbit; when at aphelion it is 3 million miles farther from the sun.

The idea of the orbital change may have sounded convincing to Whiston's contemporaries but astronomers could have asked a number of embarrassing questions. One could calculate the orbital period of a planet in a circular orbit at Earth's perihelion distance and compare the result with the actual orbital period of the earth. The difference is not 5-1/4 days. And one could ask what happened to the orbit of the comet. Being the less massive of the two bodies its orbit would have been twisted violently and

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it would not have the orbit shown in Fig. 4. I don't know whether anybody made that objection, but Whiston could have replied that the orbit of his presumed comet (with an orbital period of 74 or 575 years) was the orbit that resulted from this encounter. An astronomer then could still have said that the orbit shown on the diagram would have a period of about 57.5 years and not 575 years.

What Whiston really accomplished with his book was a revival of comet fear for another century or so with a shift in emphasis. Comets were no longer signs of catastrophies to come, they were a direct physical menace in themselves. Laymen were unaware of the fine points of astronomical measurements and of density calculations. To the layman something that looked big *was* big, and something that looked firey must be hot.

In 1781 Captain John Goodridge, "late Commander of one of His Majesty's Packet Boats Station'd at Falmouth", took up the theme of that dreadful comet once more. The small book of only 74 pages had the title *The Phoenix;* and Captain Goodridge, heavily influenced by Whiston, stated its purpose in the first paragraph:

"My design in the following Essay is to show that a Comet has been the cause of two grand catastrophes that have happened to this our Earth, for the punishment of its inhabitants, at the Fall and at the Deluge; which Comet (it is my intention to prove as far as I am able) is the real *Phoenix* of the ancients."

Captain Goodridge accepted that the six days of creation were really six years, that the Earth moved along a circular orbit before the deluge and that the comet caused the deluge. He added that "the foul chaotick matter drawn from [the comet's] atmosphere filled the atmosphere of our earth with noxious vapours that made our air very unwholesome, which soon reduced the life of man to its present standard."

According to Goodridge the comet not only produced the deluge and the first known case of air pollution, it also had "at the time of Adam's transgression" started the diurnal rotation of the earth, either by a very close approach or even a glancing blow.

Then Captain Goodridge, not having much to offer that had not been said by Whiston (whose book was out of print by then) proceeded to his pet theme.

"The *Phoenix* is said to be a bird about the size of an Eagle, and not much unlike one; that it returns once in nearly six hundred years, goes down to the Al-

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tar of the Sun, is there burnt, and a young one springs out of its Ashes and flieth off again .... The Comet's period's are upon an Average about 575 years; this certainly agrees with the return of the *Phoenix*."

While Goodridge did not believe that the phoenix could be a real bird he pointed at "the Comet's going down to the Sun, where, by the violence of the Sun's heat, it is terribly burnt, and when it returns, in flying off again, it is then called the young *Phoenix;* and let it be further observed that the Comet is of such a magnitude that it can be easily followed with the naked Eye either in its descent to, or assent (*sic*) from the Sun, all of which duly considered, proves, I think beyond a doubt, that this Comet, and this only, is what has been called the *Phoenix*."

Since the comet that caused the earth to rotate and later changed its orbit was last seen in 1680, it is due to return late in 2255 or early 2256.

And then, said Goodridge, "it will be the cause of the general Conflagration and finishing off all things with respect to this Earth."

Well, that is the story of the worst of all the comets . . . which does not even exist in space, for the comet of 531, 1106 and 1680 were not identical.

* * *

Addenda to the April, 1967, issue:

My column in the April issue has brought me half a dozen letters, five of them remarking on the table on page 57 and asking "whatever happened to geocoronium?"

As for that table I have to admit on behalf of the publisher, the editor and myself, that somebody did not read proof properly. It should have looked like this:

Number of days a comet was under observation:	Number of orbits found to be parabolic:
1 - 99 days	68 per cent
100 - 239 days	55 per cent
240 - 511 days	13 per cent

As for the question about geocoronium, my readers will remember that a section of that column was caused by a letter asking "whatever became of virginium?" It dealt with chemical elements of which the "discovery" was announced by somebody only to end up with a red face for one reason or another. Of course, "virginium," "moldavium," "alabamine" and so forth were elements on Earth, and I really should have added that there were also two such mistakes in the sky. One was called "neb-

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ulium" and the other "coronium." "Nebulium" was supposed to be an element that could be found spectroscopically in the gaseous nebulae, while "coronium" had been discovered, also spectroscopically, in the sun's corona. It is now known that neither "nebulium" nor "coronium" actually exist; what had looked like a strange element in the spectrogram were actually the lines of atoms of well known elements at very high temperatures and an equally high degree of ionization. Some of the "coronium" lines have been identified as coming from ionized iron and calcium atoms.

While the discovery of "coronium" was a simple case of misinterpretation, "geocoronium" was the result of misreasoning. About fifty years ago it was believed that our atmosphere was strictly stratified. Near the ground you had the well known nitrogen-oxygen mixture, but at high altitude there would be comparatively less oxygen, since the oxygen molecule is a bit heavier than the nitrogen molecule. At the same altitude, it was thought, there should be an admixture of hydrogen atoms, the lightest atoms of all. Carrying on this line of reasoning our atmosphere should have a top layer consisting of hydrogen atoms only, with helium atoms as an impurity. Now it was thought that the "coronium" of the sun was lighter than hydrogen, hence we might have a "coronium" layer above the hydrogen layer and in order to make it clear that this was the "coronium" of the earth it was called "geocoronium."

Actually our atmosphere is not stratified in that manner. There is no hydrogen layer at the top — and "geocoronium" doesn't exist at all. —WILLY LEY

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The Transmogrification Of Wamba's Revenge

by H. L. GOLD

Illustrated by MORROW

I

As I sit here, writing this, in a deluxe suite of the famous but resounding Waldorf-Astoria, I can look out the fourth-floor window and see the people below resembling the scurrying warrior ants of my native Africa. It was a Monday because the other married women were down at the river, beating their laundry on flat rocks, when Mr. Lundeen, the local White Hunter, came into our compound with a two-truck safari.

"What cheer, Wamba?" he said to me in pidgin Pigmy. "Why you not at river wash clothes?"

I nodded hello, ignoring his deliberate insult. He knew perfectly well that I spoke English, having graduated from Bennington College for Women, and that,

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as daughter of the Super Chief of All the Pigmies and No. 1 Wife of the Head Witch Doctor, I was exempt from menial tasks.

"Me worry on you, Wamba," he continued with his atrocious accent and the vocabulary of a retarded three-year-old, while climbing out of his Land Rover. "Me think you grow one or two inch since last time."

Oh, he was an expert needler! And he touched me at my proudest spot. The women of all our tribes didn't envy me my status, which they and I had grown up with, but there wasn't one of them that wouldn't maim herself to be my height — a good three inches shorter than any other full-grown Pigmy adult! It was difficult, but I kept silent. The tribe's whole cash crop came from Lundeen's safaris, and I mustn't jeopardize it, no matter what.

My father, the Super Chief, came out of the council hut, followed by my husband, the Head Witch Doctor, just as an oldish young man clambered down from the other vehicle and handed out a woman in jodhpurs.

"Welcome! Welcome!" cried my father in English I had taught him with no little pain; he was a terrible linguist. "Great honor! Very great! Welcome!"

My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, stood waiting for the introductions, and Lundeen obliged, using all the appropriate titles, including mine. The oldish young man was a Professor Todd, and the woman in jodhpurs was his wife. We shook hands all around, ours being small and dry, theirs being large and moist.

"You come to hunt?" asked my father politely, using up the last of his English.

"In a way," said the Professor. "You've heard of penicillin, quinine, digitalis?"

"Yes," said my husband. "We use them all the time."

"Really?" Mrs. Todd said disinterestedly. "No masks or dances to drive away evil spirits?"

My husband's eyes did not waver an inch. "Of course. Faith is part of the healing process."

"Well," the Professor said briskly, "I am here to look for more such species — in the soil, the barks, the berries, leaves — everything. I have a laboratory on wheels, and I do hope you people will help me in my search."

"What did he say?" the Super Chief asked. I translated and he said, "What's in it for us?"

"Honor," said the Witch Doctor, and, "Whatever squeezes through my fingers," said Lundeen, both in Pigmy. Then, in pseudo-British/English, Lundeen said, "I say, Professor, why don't you show our royal hosts your laboratory while I show Mrs. Todd the compound?"

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"Splendid," said Prof. Todd. "This way, please."

I followed the three men, but kept looking back over my shoulder. Just as I expected, the White Hunter was charming the Professor's wife, a scene I had witnessed every time there was a giddy female in a safari. This time, however, he was bold to the point of contempt, a fact that was not lost on the Professor, who stopped at the steps of the traveling laboratory and looked after the pair. She was holding Lundeen's upper arm in both her hands and smiling dizzily up at him. I saw pain cross the Professor's face before he turned and ushered us into the air-conditioned laboratory.

"Bless me!" said my husband in awe, while my father whistled. As for myself, I had seen labs of one sort or another, but nothing so marvelously compact and complete as this.

I said so, and Prof. Todd's face lit up with pride. "Thank you," he said. "Mr. Lundeen told me of your American education, Princess, and your work, Doctor, at the hospital in Mbuti, and he assured me that you both would be invaluable to our mission."

"We are yours to command," quoted the Head Witch Doctor.

"Good, good. Then you can help me organize your people into work parties, each group to collect whatever it's assigned to — ferns, soils, barks, and so forth. And you, Princess, will be my lab assistant."

"And you'll need a cleaning woman twice a week," I said.

"No, no," said the Professor quickly. "Mr. Lundeen wouldn't trust anyone but you to keep things clean and orderly. Well!" he exclaimed and rubbed his hands. "We're practically in business right now!"

"Yes," said my husband, the Head Witch Doctor. "In one way or another, Mr. Lundeen always gives us the business."

My father had been following all this with great difficulty. Now he asked me what the arrangements were. I told him.

"You mean that you, the Princess, are to be a housemaid?" he all but roared in Pigmy. "I forbid it!"

"What seems to be the difficulty?" asked Prof. Todd, bewildered.

"He's a stickler for protocol," I answered. "We'll straighten it out with Mr. Lundeen."

"Good, good. We don't want any hurt feelings. Now, Doctor, I'll need to know how many able-bodied people you have, so we can set up work parties. . . . ."

Looking back over what I have written, I feel terribly unlike

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a professional writer. I haven't, for example, told you all I knew about the White Hunter — that he came from Ohio, but wouldn't wear, drive or talk anything not British; his owning a Land Rover instead of a Jeep was completely characteristic. You mustn't think he was typical of White Hunters. He wasn't typical of anything but a greedy, selfish, overbearing opportunist, a phony who loved to humiliate us because we couldn't hit back. And we couldn't hit back because no other White Hunter bothered with us. They used to, but that was before Lundeen arrived.

I don't know what to add about Prof. Todd. He was the average dedicated scientist who, for no discernible reason, happened to be married to a vain, stupid woman, younger than himself.

I see that I've given Mrs. Todd only one line of dialogue, when, in fact, she was anything but inarticulate, in a nasty, bored sort of way — except, I soon discovered, when she was alone with an admirer. Or thought they were alone. I made a point of watching her and Lundeen — for my people's sake, of course. I wanted them to be paid for their work — and, come to think of it, mine too — because so much depended on it.

Which brings me to our tribal setup. It was commonly known that we Pigmies were primitive nomads, but I've never encountered anyone who knew that the central tribe, ours, was not. The satellite tribes all visited us in turn, for whatever meager trading we could do, but mainly for treatment of their and our sick and aged. The White Hunter was essential to this because he brought us medicines, for which he extorted every last penny he allowed us to make from his safaris.

"Things are going just beautifully, Princess!" Prof. Todd said enthusiastically three days later. "The work parties would have overwhelmed me if not for your help with the tagging and classifying. I've never seen anyone pick up details as fast as you — unless it's your husband!"

A lot he knew! Between that fathead Lundeen and that insipid idiot Mrs. Todd, the tribe was on the verge of mutiny, medicines or no medicines. With her hanging adoringly onto his arm, he would needle the work parties. in his execrable Pigmy so that they had either to strangle him or work off their anger on their jobs. Then, when Prof. Todd came up, he could only compli-

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ment Lundeen for their zeal. (The work parties were organized into squads, with each squad searching for a different thing, like soil samples, fungi, roots, berries and so on. And they worked in each other's footsteps, going away from the compound, between two lines of rope which my father and husband laid out differently each day.)

After leaving the parties to the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief, the two would come to the lab and work me over. They knew none of us could complain to the Professor, so we were safe targets. Lundeen's favorite stunt was to ask me to wipe things far over my head, which I had to reach by standing on a lab stool, and making me clean out the animals' cages. Todd didn't know what was going on, because the orders were in Pigmy. Then Mrs. Todd would say, "Princess, darling, would it be too much trouble to light my cigarette?" And I would. And she'd blow smoke in my face — when Todd's back was turned.

I had never felt such hatred before! Nor could I vent it on anyone or anything; my husband and father had their own troubles, one treating the rebellious with tranquilizers and the other with orders to obey instructions and ignore the needling.

All this was going through my mind when I saw Prof. Todd peering at me at eye-level. "I've been driving you too hard," he said. "You look tired."

Tired? I was *exhausted,* working all day and staying up all night to keep an eye on Lundeen and Mrs. Todd. And I hadn't gotten anything more incriminating on my little battery-powered tape recorder than some slurping noises that I knew were kisses, but that wouldn't convince anyone else. Neither of the pair was brainy enough to be so circumspect. There *had* to be some reason for each staying in his own guest hut all night. I thought I knew what it was, so I let my shoulders and face slump and mumbled something about duty and honor.

"I know how you feel; I feel the same way about saving lives." Prof. Todd said, leading me firmly out of the laboratory. "But one has one's duty to oneself too, you know. I want you to take the day off and *sleep!*"

"Yes, Professor," I said obediently. "I could sleep for days."

"Then take tomorrow off as well," he said, taking me to my hut, and he wouldn't leave until I pretended to doze off. "Night-night, sleep tight," he whispered, leaving on tippy toes.

Take my word for it, it was almost more than I could do

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not to fall asleep. But I had to stay awake! What a nice guy, I thought — how could he have stayed married to this queen of the stag line? Did she, to quote Mad Ave, know where the body was buried? I didn't know, but I intended to find out.

When I was sure Prof. Todd was inside his lab and unlikely to look outside, I slipped out with my tape recorder and searched for the miscreants. As I suspected, they were nowhere in the compound. The Land Rover also was gone.

I followed the freshest tire tracks out of the compound. I was worried for the moment about being seen by the work parties, but the tracks led off in the opposite direction.

Settling down to what was, for a Pigmy, and a woman at that, and a woman three inches shorter than any other adult Pigmy to boot, a steady lope, I kept listening for the Land Rover and watching the ground for tracks leading off the rutted jungle road. Put yourself in my place, wouldn't you expect them to drive miles away and get off the trail so they wouldn't be surprised by a passerby?

Au contraire, that was expecting too much of these nasty specimens, for I came upon the vehicle as I rounded a bend barely 15 minutes from home.

I slipped up on its blind side, hung my microphone on a tarpaulin rope and paid out wire as I backed off the road into the jungle. Screened by a bush, I could hear very clearly what was going on as I switched on the machine.

"Now do you believe me, you mad, impetuous boy?" said Mrs. Todd a little breathlessly. "I told you I love you. How many ways are there of convincing you?"

"You could tell me why you married him in the first place," Lundeen said in a sullen voice.

"Why, it's obvious, sweetheart. Everybody expects him to win the Nobel Prize."

"So that's why you came along on this expedition!"

"Came along? I took him away from teaching at the University, bought him the best portable lab money could buy, financed the whole safari —"

"WHAT?" cried Lundeen.

"You mean you didn't know I'm filthy rich?" she said. "You loved me for myself alone?"

I could practically hear the White Hunter's excuse for a brain going into reverse. Knowing him from many safaris, I could tell he had been about to say through a stiff upper lip that he'd marry her in a minute if not for his (fictitious) wife and tots at home, who needed him and the

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little money he brought in from his safaris.

"Of course I didn't know," he said, his voice sounding choked. "But what difference would it have made? Me a lowly — "

"Don't say it!" she cried. "You're a fine, handsome, intelligent man, and I can't stand another day with that creep, even if he does win the Nobel Prize!"

"Then let's leave him here — "

"— without his laboratory, so he can't follow us — "

"— but would you consent to be my — my wife?"

"Dearest," she said, "I would. And you won't have to be a White Hunter unless you want to be."

"Not without you," he vowed piously. I believed him. He wouldn't let all that money go unguarded.

Well, so much for evidence. I had all I needed. So I stowed away the microphone and wire and headed back to the compound. They came in an hour later and made for Lundeen's hut. I waited till they started packing his campaign chest, then went into the hut with two glasses, a bottle of Scotch and a soda bottle on a tray.

"Dash it all, Princess, you're full of surprises!" Lundeen exclaimed. "I had sort of been looking forward to our daily snit about bringing us drinks."

"One must do what one must do," I said meekly.

"I don't leave you much choice, do I?" he boomed.

"None at all."

"Darling, you're so masterful," Mrs. Todd was saying as I left.

I went back to my hut and took out the treasure chest I kept under my bunk. My Barbie and Ken doll clothing were at the top. I took them out and then gathered all the rags I could find and returned to Lundeen's hut. It was the sickest Night I had ever spent.

Prof. Todd looked very upset when I came into the lab the next morning, toting a bag and my tape recorder. He was wearing a surgical mask for some reason — to avoid contaminating the white rats he was trying to work on, I suppose.

"Princess!" he cried. "My wife is gone!"

"Real gone," I said with a grin. "And that's not just her opinion. It's Lundeen's, too."

"You think — " he started to say, but couldn't continue.

I pushed aside the chemistry equipment on his table and upended my bag. Two miniature figures in little green smocks tumbled out amid the four white rats.

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Todd stared as the figures jumped to their feet and, clinging to each other, looked wildly around them.

"That's Lundeen and my wife!" he gasped. "What have you *done* to them?"

"I can't tell you that," I said. "But I want you to listen to something so you'll know that what I've done is justified." And I played back the love scene I had recorded the day before.

"So that's why she married me," he said brokenly. "I always wondered." He bent down to the little figures. "You didn't have to leave me stranded," he cried out to Mrs. Todd, who clapped her hands over her ears. "I love you enough to give you a divorce."

Taking off his surgical mask, he turned to me. "You know that what you've done is impossible, don't you? *Nothing* can shrink five- or six-foot people to five or six inches!"

I backed away from him. "But that's not what's important!" I said in alarm. "Not only were they planning to leave you stranded, they were going to leave the tribe unpaid!"

Todd lost his mad glare. "No question of it, they're a matched set of stinkers," he said. "But what have you done? How does it work? You've got to tell me all about it!"

"I can't. It's so potent a taboo that nobody but the chiefs and witch doctors know about it. I myself learned about it only by accident."

The tiny people had been making shrill noises. Now Lundeen pushed Mrs. Todd aside and piped, "Todd, listen to me!"

"What is it?" Todd asked, bending down to hear the squeaky voice.

"The secret is in the Scotch she gave us yesterday. I can't tell you what suffering we went through last night, shrinking down to this size. Get to that bottle before she does! It's in my hut!"

I was out of the lab door and running for Lundeen's hut as fast as I could go. Halfway there, Todd passed me. It was the only time in my life that I ever wished I were not so small, for my strides were five to his one. And I cursed myself for stupidly not throwing the bottle into a fire.

When he reached the hut, I stopped and went back to the lab. The tiny couple in tiny voices pleaded for an antidote as I climbed onto a stool and waited for Todd to come back, which he did a few minutes later, the bottle in his hand and a hard look on his face.

There was silence as he measured out the Scotch in eye-

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droppers and fed different amounts of it to the four white rats. I turned away. Until last night, I had never seen anyone or anything shrink. It was a hideous thing. I had hoped never to see it again.

"All right, Princess, you can look now," the Professor said in a sick voice.

I turned. The rats were four different sizes, the littlest being very little indeed. Prof. Todd was cleaning up the last evidence of the shrinking process, as I cleaned up after Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, in such a fright over leaving traces that I had overlooked the Scotch.

"Is this how Pigmies get small?" he asked me.

"No," I said shakily. "We breed true and are immune to — to what I put in the bottle."

"Then what is it for?"

"Babies of mixed parentage, Pigmy and outsider. And that is all I know about it!"

"Not even the dosages?" he demanded.

"Not even that," I said.

He filled the eyedroppers again and fed the mixture to the rats, while I looked away. When the feeding and shrinking had stopped, he said, "It stabilizes at one-tenth normal size. And you Pigmies are immune to it. Which means —" He stared unbelievingly. "That's not possible!"

"Why not?" I said, falling back until he grabbed my shoulders. I forget which Man it was — Peking Man or Java Man or something —"

"But he was only nine feet tall!"

"What if he wasn't Peking Man at all, but Peking *Baby?*" I said.

He dropped his hands and sat down heavily. "Incredible," he said. "Absolutely incredible." He looked at me. "Princess, I've got to have a decent amount of whatever it is to work on."

"No!" I said. "No!"

"If you don't get it for me," he said, "I'll invite your husband and father in to see what you've done to these two!"

"Don't — *please!*" I begged. "I'll get you some. But you've got to help me with an alibi, so they don't get suspicious."

"It's a deal," he said.

"What about us?" shrilled Lundeen. "You can't leave us like this!"

Todd grinned a wicked grin. "Would you care to bet on that?"

"I'll do anything you say!" Mrs. Todd piped. "I'll give you all my money — anything —"

"Don't bother," Todd said. "I intend to have incontestable proof of your deaths. So I get your money anyhow, without you to spoil it."

He put them, kicking and trying to bite, into a cage and cover-

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ed it. As an afterthought, he filled the feeder of the cage with a slice of bread and some cold cuts and water.

"Have fun, kiddies," he said merrily, and we went out and he carefully locked the door.

While the Professor stood guard, I pulled out a very old, very sturdy trunk from under my husband's bunk, opened it and scraped off as much moss as I dared from the five boulders in it, into a test tube Prof. Todd had given me. I closed the trunk and pushed it back under the bunk.

"Good, good," he said as I handed him the stoppered tube. "Now to furnish us with an alibi. Do you know any good places to lose a Land Rover?"

"There is a dandy quicksand pit not far away," I said, catching some of his excitement.

We got into the Land Rover, and I guided him to the spot. Pushing from the rear, we shoved the vehicle into the pit. When it vanished, we brushed away our footprints and went back to the lab.

I told him along the way what little I knew of the moss — that it was native only to this part of the world, that it had been totally destroyed by our ancestors, except on the five stones, after the Pigmy elephant problem, that there was no antidote, and that not the moss but selective breeding accounted for the size I was so proud of being.

That evening, we asked people if they had seen Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, who had never been this late before. As the hours passed, everyone got a little edgy, watching the gate of the compound.

At last the Professor looked at his watch and said, "No sense staying up. They must have driven further than they realized and made camp."

So we went to bed.

Around noon the next day, Todd let himself be worked up over their disappearance and consented to lead one of their search parties. My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, and my father, the Super Chief, led the other two. Naturally, I went with my husband, partly because that's a No. 1 wife's place, but mostly because I wanted him to make the discovery himself — which he did with only five or six little nudges from me. The drummer sent out the message and soon the other two parties joined ours.

"A great, great pity," said my father with real feeling, looking down sadly at the quicksand pit. "Now how will we get another White Hunter to bring safaris to us?"

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"Always the practical man," my husband said admiringly. "Yes, this could be the end of tribal civilization as we know it, anyway."

Todd asked me what the unseemingly grief was about, and I told him. Doing his best to look bereaved, he held up his hands for silence.

"My friends — and in the short time I have known you, you have become friends in need and in deed — I came here in search of a new wonder drug and I think perhaps I have found it," he said, with me translating as he went. "In return for the testimony of your leaders so I can inherit my late wife's money, I shall finance the construction of a vast compound and enough huts to house *all* your tribes at one time!"

There was a great cheer, led by the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief.

"Not only that," the Professor continued, "there must be room in the compound for one hundred guest huts, a tremendous meeting hut and a large cooking-and-eating hut, plus classroom huts and an airfield. All this must be accomplished within less than one month. Damn the expense — full speed ahead!"

The crowd cheered again and headed homeward, talking and gesticulating animatedly among themselves.

"It is very nice to become prosperous," my father said in Pigmy. "But what does he want to spend all this money for?"

"You are with him all day, every day," my husband said to me. "It would be discourteous to ask outright, but has he given you no idea?"

"None at all," I confessed.

It was true. Whatever Prof. Todd had dreamed up, he hadn't discussed or even hinted at it till now, nor could I understand it any more than they did. I promised to do everything possible, short of asking, to find out what he had in mind.

Early the next morning, we drove to Mbuti in the mobile laboratory: the Professor, the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief in the front seat and me in the lab, which was kept locked at all times. Mrs. Todd and Lundeen hung onto the bars of their cage as the lab bounced and lurched in and out of the ruts of the jungle road. They alternately tried to bribe and threaten me. I looked at them without listening, doing my best to figure out what Todd meant to do.

I hadn't succeeded when we reached town, nor when we each deposed as to the fates of the unlucky pair, nor when the Professor withdrew a very large amount

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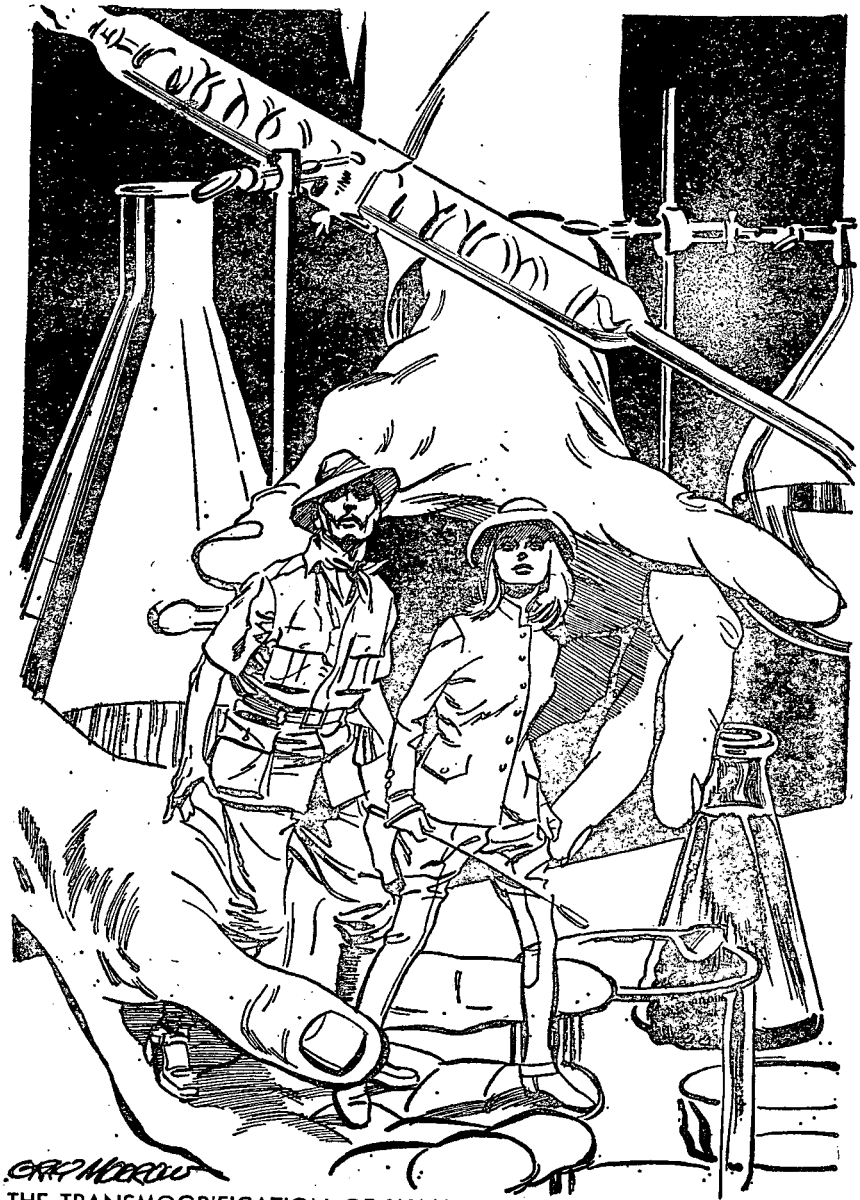

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of money and gave part of it to my father and husband to buy whatever supplies were needed, as well as a used truck and Jeep that he presented to the tribe.

While the men were shopping, he and I went to the cable office, where he sent off a number of telegrams to Dr. this and Prof. that in various countries, on both sides of the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. I had no trouble getting to see what he had composed as he went through a little black book for the addresses. He couldn't have been less secretive about his invitation to "Spend Your Vacation in Glamorous, Unspoiled Mbuti! Live for Two Madcap Weeks Amid the Unchanging Pigmies of Still-Dark Africa!" And so forth.

He smiled down at me as I frowned over the inscrutable telegram.

"Puzzle you?" he asked. "It shouldn't. This is why I want all the tribes together and the huge compound and huts to house them, because we are going to have company from all over the world. Not a great many by resort standards, but enough to make room for in the jungle."

I couldn't ask, of course, but I could — and did — look worried.

"Are you thinking that I'll betray your secret, Princess?" I nodded. "I give you my word," he said, "that I shall not be the one to do so."

I brightened visibly, and when the other two men joined us, I told them about the cablegrams.

"To study us, no doubt," said the Super Chief.

"A symposium, perhaps," said the Head Witch Doctor.

"Whatever it is," I said, "it'll be in practically the only place on Earth that isn't preparing for war. Anyhow, we will know very soon. The cables gave March 22nd as the opening date."

"When is that?" asked my husband.

"I asked at the cable office. Three weeks from now."

"Then we must really hurry," said my father.

And hurry we did as each tribe reported in and went to work on its portion of the new compound and the various huts. I, meanwhile, assisted Todd in the lab, but without understanding what he was calling this meeting for.

Could it be the strange moss? Then why had he carelessly emptied the test tube of it into an enameled tray kind of thing and shoved it under the lab's night light and seem to have forgotten it? Instead, he was taking blood samples from many of us — and even with great difficulty, a tiny amount from Lundeen and Mrs. Todd. These he made plates of,

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and to my unskilled eyes they looked like any other blood specimens. Which goes to show how much Bio I had absorbed at Bennington!

With March 22nd came bush planes to the landing field that had been completed only the night before. They discharged their passengers and took off to make room for more incoming bush planes. Prof. Todd shook hands with each passenger; they waved hello to each other and then were taken, along with their luggage, to the guest huts. Every hut had a sign listing the nationality of its occupants or, for the large ones, its function.

Oh, I forgot to mention that Todd had had a generator truck come in and string electrical cables to all the huts and to light the streets. The guests accepted it as normal, but our tribes were amazed and delighted.

"I say, Princess," said Lundeen in one of his rare polite moments, "the joint seems to be jumping. Is it because of us?"

"Not at all," I gloated. "The Professor gave me his word that he wouldn't betray my awful revenge."

"Awful is the word," said Mrs. Todd. "How could you *do* such a thing?"

"I didn't know," I said guiltily. "I knew it would shrink you somewhat, but I never suspected —"

"Never mind what you never suspected," said Lundeen, rattling the door of their cage. "Get us out of here. It's not decent to lock up two human beings like a couple of canaries!"

"It's better than you deserve!" I snapped back, pulling the cover down over the cage to shut out their accusing voices.

Prof. Todd unlocked the door and came into the lab, locking the door again before sitting on a stool in the flow of the air conditioner. "This is the only tolerable place in the compound," he said, fanning himself. "Wish I'd had time to air-condition the huts."

"Please, Professor!" said Lundeen's muffled voice. "Take the cover off. We'll behave."

Todd ignored him, saying, "Every last person I sent a cablegram to is here! Not a single absentee!"

"That's wonderful," I said. "And you all seem to know one another."

He gave me a wicked grin. "You'd love to know what's going on, wouldn't you? But you can't ask because that would be rude. Right?

I admitted it.

"Well," he said, "you and the

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other leaders of your tribes are invited to the meeting hut tonight, and you'll learn about what you and I have been doing for the past few weeks."

"But what about us?" shrilled Mrs. Todd under the cover.

"What *about* you?" mocked Prof. Todd. "Seems to me that your bodies just about fit your souls!"

However, it was an indication of his own great soul that he uncovered their cage and left the light on before locking the laboratory. Can you imagine what those two would have done if the situation were reversed? So could I. I said so.

"Princess," he said thoughtfully, "if a person, a family, a tribe or a nation imitates an enemy's cruelty or oppression, there would be nothing to distinguish one from the other. The more morality you give up, the more animal you become, the less you deserve to win an argument or a war."

"Even temporarily?" I asked. "Just long enough to win?"

"No! Before, during and after the duration — however long it takes — however necessary it seems!" He unclenched his fists and smiled crookedly. "Sorry. It's the one subject I get violent on. See you in the meeting hut."

Shaken by his vehemence, I watched him stride off to his own hut, a young man aged before his time by clinging to ideals all but gone in a world heading for a final smashup.

I found my husband and the Super Chief in our hut, listening to the news on my portable radio while waiting supper for me. I sat down, and the No. 2 and No. 3 Wives served us a really good warthog stew. I complimented them, and they giggled a thank you. To me, then, it was just an average cozy family scene, with no hint of the incredible turmoil so short a time away. I hope they all know how much I miss them, wherever they are.

Depressed as we always were by the world's headlong rush toward destruction, the Head Witch Doctor turned off the radio and asked whether I knew anything more than I had the day before.

"Afraid not," I said. "But the Professor assured me we would learn all about it tonight."

"Just more blood samples?" he said. I nodded. "I asked the Chest and Belly Witch Doctors what it could mean. They told me they didn't know, but judging from the attendance here, with scientists from everywhere on Earth, it must be as important a discovery as antibiotics."

"I hope you can translate it into Pigmy that I can understand," said the Super Chief.

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"I'll do my best," I promised, "but science was never my best subject."

"I just hope I can stay awake," said the Head Witch Doctor wearily. "I've got a six-month backlog of mental cases since the other tribes came."

"If I can help with the laying on of hands, call on me," offered the Super Chief.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Wait! There's a young girl who."

I left them talking shop and wandered around the compound just as the lights came on. Huge as it was, it seemed more crowded even than New York or Boston, each hut spilling adults and children of all ages into the street, and everywhere under foot ran the multitudes of dogs that had come along as part of each family. Naturally, I had to say hello every step of the way, so I was glad to join the crowd entering the meeting hut.

By Pigmy standards, the hut was as enormous as Yankee Stadium. There were wooden benches that the Professor had ordered built spaced evenly from the entrance to the movie screen at the extreme end, leaving only enough room for the aisles, which right now were jammed with men and women from all over, clustered in loud, gesticulating groups. They mostly spoke English, though I did hear some French and Russian.

"Order, please! Order!" said the voice of Prof. Todd over the loudspeakers mounted on the poles holding up the roof. "Everyone please be seated!"

The hubbub died as the people took their seats, including us Pigmies, and I saw Todd in the center aisle with a movie projector.

"This had better be good!" someone said very loudly.

"That," Todd said into his microphone, "is for posterity to judge. But I think my using the secret assembly call will be justified."

He dimmed the house lights and turned on the projector. The screen lit up with vividly colored swimming shapes that I recognized as bacteria and blood cells. This, of course, was what the Professor and I had been filming with microscope and movie camera. Into this swarming colony came a giant blunt object — a pipette — and suddenly the bacteria began shrinking. The crowd murmured excitedly.

"That's our secret ingredient!" the Head Witch Doctor said to me through his teeth. "How did he get hold of it?"

"The work parties?" I suggested, innocently.

He nodded and subsided as the Professor explained that this sub-

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stance, unknown anywhere else in the world, was shrinking one deadly bacillus after another right before their eyes.

"Why doesn't it shrink the blood cells?" someone called out.

"That," Prof. Todd evaded, "needs more study. After all, I have been here only a few weeks."

"What about viruses?" somebody else inquired.

He was intimating that they too were undoubtedly shrunken, but that his equipment had necessarily been limited in portability, while I, translating all this to the Super Chief with one part of my mind, was using the other part to figure out another question: why hadn't the blood cells also contracted?

The answer came to me so suddenly that I almost jumped up and blurted it out: the blood was from us Pigmies and Lundeen and Mrs. Todd only! Which led to still another question: how would he keep the audience from testing it on their own blood? I didn't know, but my respect for him had grown even greater; I was sure he had it all worked out in his mind.

When the film ended, the scientists sat stunned. One man finally stood up and said, "If ever I have seen a discovery worthy of the Nobel Prize, this is it!"

Everybody applauded. Prof. Todd looked as if he wished he had a pebble to kick, so he could say, "Aw, shucks, fellas — " They crowded around him, noiser than before the show, while my people left the meeting hut in cold silence.

I pretended to have some reason for going to the laboratory, but my husband took my wrist in his hand and led me politely but firmly to our hut. "We have some matters that need to be taken care of," he said, and the chiefs and witch doctors of the tribes nodded grimly.

He pulled the old trunk from beneath his bunk and opened it. The five rocks looked exactly as they always had. And why not? I had exposed the moss to light until the little scratches I had made grew back again. But I needn't have bothered, I discovered, for he dragged it into the street, filled it with firewood — and threw a blazing torch into it.

"There," he said. "Wherever the Professor got his sample no longer matters. It is a sheer miracle that it hadn't been discovered long ago." He turned toward me. "Princess," he said, "you must find and destroy his specimen!"

"Right!" a chief said. "If it is used by everyone, being a Pigmy won't be the great honor it is today!"

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"Maybe they won't want the honor," I said diplomatically.

"Not want it?" the Super Chief repeated in outraged amazement. "Have you ever heard such nonsense?"

"Never!" said the Head Witch Doctor, and even I had to join the nodding; I hadn't believed my suggestion for an instant. He pointed in the general direction of the lab and said, "Go! Do your duty!"

I left quickly, as a good little Pigmy wife should, and a few minutes later was at the lab, ringing the doorbell. The Professor peeked at me through the peephole and let me in, pointing to the other stool. I climbed up it as he raised the volume of his radio-looking thing, which he had been listening to.

"This will give you a kick, Princess!" he said with that typical crooked grin. "Recognize anybody's voice?"

I had been looking intently at the enameled tray he had dumped the test tube into and put up near the night light and wondering how I could get up there without his noticing. It was impossible with him present. I would have to find an excuse for staying after he left and hope he would believe it.

I unfrowned and cocked my head toward the radio, pretending to listen — and almost fell off the stool, for, hearing the squeaky little voices of Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, I glanced up and saw their cage with its door open and them gone!

"How — how —" I stammered.

"By tying tag strings together and getting through the air-conditioning duct," he said happily.

"You don't look as if you cared," I said.

"Oh, but I do!" he exclaimed. "Listen! They're at the English hut."

"Naturally," I said. "Where else would that silly Anglophile go?"

A genuine British voice could now be heard saying, "It isn't as if we doubted your word, old boy, but how do we know you weren't always this size and that this perfectly ordinary-looking moss you've brought us isn't perfectly ordinary?"

Lundeen's very high, very excited and very fake British voice said, "Dash it all, try it on yourselves!"

"On qurselves?" echoed another speaker. "What if it's poisonous or something?"

"Absolutely," the first man agreed. There was silence, broken by the barking of the ubiquitous dogs outside. "I've got it!" he said. "Why not try it on one of these cursed mongrels?"

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"Capital idea!" "Excellent suggestion!" and other compliments led to someone going out into the street and returning shortly with a yapping mutt.

"How do we feed it to him?" someone asked. "In Scotch, like you?"

"I don't think dogs drink Scotch," Lundeen said. "Why not water?"

"Why not indeed?" said the first man. There was a splashing sound followed by a mixing sound, and he said, "Here you are, Bowser! Drink it down like a good fellow," which was succeeded by a lapping sound, then silence.

"Great Scott!" one of the men cried in horror, and the rest made a sort of suppressed retching sound.

"You see? You see?" Lundeen and Mrs. Todd kept shrilling.

When it was all over, the first man asked, "Did anyone think of measuring the poor beast before and after?"

"No, but I'd say he's no more than one-tenth his original size," a man answered.

The others agreed.

"Well," the first one said briskly, "let's get down to cold facts, shall we? The stuff works; I think we're all convinced of that. That being so, the next question is: have you brought us enough to serve as a starter set?"

"Plenty!" shrilled Lundeen. "Todd dumped the same amount into a tray and kept it under a light and now the tray is almost overflowing!"

I looked up at the tray and down at Prof. Todd, who was listening with a great beatific smile on his face. So that was why he had emptied the test tube with such seeming indifference!

With equal seeming indifference, I moved my stool under the light. He didn't notice. I took a beaker of some acid and warily stood on the stool. His back was to me when I poured the acid into the tray. I climbed down and put the beaker back just as he turned off the radio and swung around to face me.

"Let's get out of here, Princess," he said, grinning. "Those two have to get back in again without suspecting we know what they've done."

Of course, I assented readily. Half of my job was done. The only problem remaining was: how could I get rid of the last of the moss in the British guest hut?

Todd and I said good night, and he made for his hut while I went toward the British one. Crouching in its shadow, I waited until after the light was doused. When I was sure they were all asleep, I began edging to the door. I heard a faint noise and

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stopped dead. A man in pajamas came stealing out. He darted from hut to hut, pausing at each one to look about before going on to the next. He slipped into the seventh hut, an din a moment the light went on.

I sneaked up to the hut and listened — in its shadow, naturally.

"— mean by waking us up?" a heavy Slavic voice was demanding.

"I had to," a British voice said urgently. "It's of the utmost importance. Now please listen attentively. I may not have time to repeat." And he told them all about Lundeen, Mrs. Todd, the moss and the dog.

When he finished, someone laughed. As if at a signal, the others began laughing, too.

"Pléase! Please!" the British voice said. "If you don't believe me, try it on a dog. But do it quickly, before I'm missed!"

"It is your story," another Slavic voice said. "You get the dog."

I retreated behind the hut as the man in pajamas came out and looked up and down the street. "Just my luck," he muttered bitterly, "they're all asleep. Here, Spot! Here, Prince, Fido, Rags!" And he snapped his fingers until a dog a few huts away came ambling up with its tail wagging drowsily.

He took it inside. For the next space of time I was glad again that I only had to hear the process instead of seeing it.

"So," the first Slavic voice said stolidly. "It is like you say. The dog is maybe a tenth of its former size. So?"

"What good is that?" another said. "Who would want such little dogs?"

"For this you expect to get paid?" the leader asked.

"Damn, damn and double damn!" the Englishman exploded in a furious whisper. "Do you think I'm a traitor? I brought you some of this stuff because it might have military importance. Don't ask me how — I'm only a scientist. But if it does, I don't want one half of the world using it on the other half — and that means your half as well as mine!"

"*Da,* we have such soft-headed people among us, too," said the leader. "But it could be. It could be . . . ."

"Well, you work it out yourselves," the Englishman said. "I must get back now."

"Wait!" said the leader. "What should we do with the little dog?"

"That's your problem," said the Englishman, sprinting out the door.

So I set the hut afire, then went down to the British hut and did the same there. They were lovely fires. I stood admiring them while

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the men of both huts came rushing out.

"Did you save anything?" one of the Englishmen asked another.

"Just the moss and my tennis racquet," the second replied.

My heart fell. But it lifted as I followed the Englishman with the peculiar morality to the Russian hut.

"Did you save the moss?" he asked anxiously.

"Just that and my balalaika," the leader said.

I trudged worriedly home to bed. My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, opened his eyes and asked, "Have you destroyed the moss?"

"Half of it," I said with elliptical truth. I didn't dare tell him now I had two more halves to destroy.

When he was gone the next morning, I took the revolver from his footlocker and put it in my pocket, then went asking for the English and Russian scientists. I was told that Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin were with Todd, whom they had asked to radio for a bush plane. I ran to the lab. Todd and the two men were in the Jeep, about to leave.

"Stop!" I yelled. "I have to come along!"

They waited for me. When I was aboard, Todd stepped on the gas. I looked at their luggage. Each had an overnight bag, donated, no doubt, by luckier fellow countrymen. And each overnight bag carried the moss, I was sure.

"Terribly sorry about the fire," said Todd. "Lost everything, eh?"

"Down to the last button," Dr. Perry said.

"Me, too," said Prof. Kropotkin. "But why only our two huts?"

"I can't possibly imagine," said Todd jauntingly.

I sat back, trying to work out my strategy. I could shoot Todd and perhaps one of the others, not both, before being overpowered. The Jeep would smash into something — and spill the moss all over the place. No good. I had to get aboard the bush plane somehow and wait for my chance.

The plane was waiting on the airfield when we got there. Pulling up alongside it, Prof Todd shook hands with both men, put his hand in a pocket, brought it out and shook my hand. When he let go, I felt something wadded up in my palm. I didn't have time to look as he all but pushed us into the plane.

"Have a good trip!" he sang out. "As for you, Princess Wamba, come back when you're ready!"

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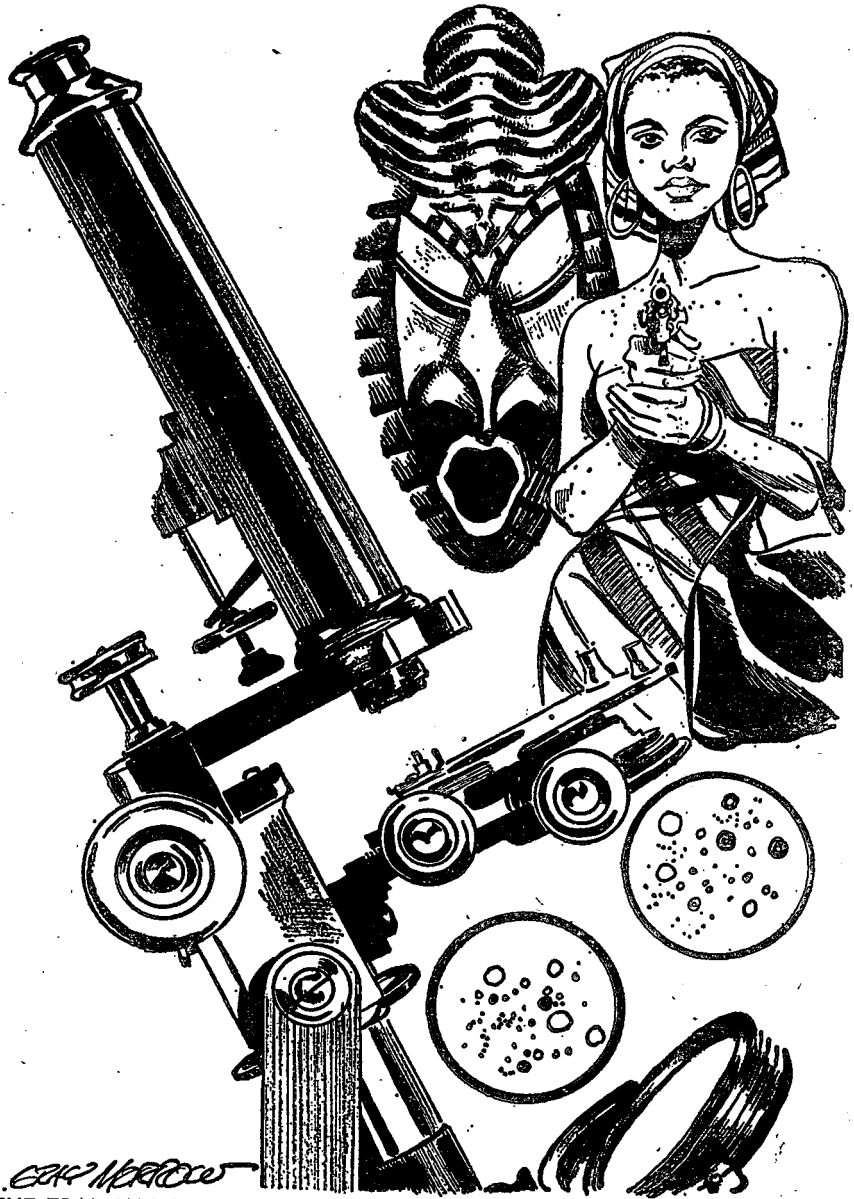

THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF WAMBA'S REVENGE 127

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The pilot closed the door and came through for the fares. I opened my hand and found in it a ball of green papers. When I smoothed them out, the pilot goggled and said. "Golly, Princess, I can't change that!"

Prof. Todd had slipped me four $1,000 bills!

I smiled nervously and promised to have one changed when we landed, so I could pay him. He said, "Never mind. Royalty rides free on my plane!"

"Thank you," I said regally.

He disappeared up front, closing the door behind him. I sat in back of the two men until we took off and leveled out. Then I got up and menaced them with the revolver.

"All right," I said, "hand over the moss — and no funny business — or you get plugged!"

Dr. Perry studied me and the gun. "What bad movie is that from?"

"C'mon, c'mon!" I ground out. "The moss — hand it over!"

"You really seem determined," Perry said thoughtfully. "But why both of us? Do you know something I don't know?"

"Yes! Somebody in your party is a traitor — gave some of the moss to the Russians. Now let's have it — or else!"

He turned to Prof. Kropotkin. "Is that true?"

"Of course," Kropotkin said with a smile. "I trust you do not expect me to reveal his name."

"Not at all, not at all," Dr. Perry said hastily. "No more than we would turn over our list to you."

I was getting exasperated with this dialogue, which shut out me and my revolver. I waved it and threatened to shoot if they didn't come across.

Dr. Perry stood up and moved toward me. "My dear girl, this is preposterous. Now if you'll just give me the gun, we'll all forget the whole unpleasant incident."

"No, you don't!" I cried, panicking. I ran to the door of the cockpit, grasped it and pulled. "It's locked!"

"Did you think you were the only person who ever tried this?" Perry asked soothingly. "Now do be reasonable . . . ."

I shut my eyes and squeezed the trigger with both hands. Nothing happened!

He took the revolver away quite easily, saying, "Every gun I've ever been personally associated with had a safety latch, you know. Sort of evens things up with idiots who didn't know it was loaded, wouldn't you say?"

I sat down with my face in my hands. "Now I'll never be able to go home again! They would abandon me in the jungle!"

"In this day and age? Never!"

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Prof. Kropotkin said, putting an arm around my shoulder and holding me comfortingly against his chest.

"No, really they would," Perry told him. "I read it somewhere. Well, there's only one thing to do. I'll take her back to London with me."

"And what is wrong with me taking her to Moscow?" Kropotkin demanded.

"I don't want to go with either of you," I sobbed. "Won't you *please* give me the moss so I can destroy it and go home?"

"Dreadfully sorry, Your Highness," said Perry.

"Not a chance," said Kropotkin. "I would like to destroy his moss and he would like to destroy mine. But we are rational human beings, with no love for violence. So come with me!"

"No, me!" cried Perry.

I looked at them through a blur of tears. "Then I guess I'll go with you, Dr. Perry. At least I know the language. I'll come to Moscow, Prof. Kropotkin, after I finally destroy Dr. Perry's specimen."

"Fine!" exclaimed Kropotkin. "I promise you full-scale red-carpet welcome — from primitive Africa to People's Democracy!"

"That will be nothing compared with *our* reception!" said Perry. "You won't regret your decision, Princess!"

We were all quite friendly by the time we reached Mlarki, the nearest jet airfield. I didn't really know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't supersonic military airplanes waiting for us, one from England and the other from Russia. There was time only for a last friendly wave before Dr. Perry and I were hustled into our plane and Prof. Kropotkin into his.

As soon as we were airborne, Dr. Perry opened his overnight bag, and I was amazed to see Lundeen, Mrs. Todd and the tiny dog climb out.

"About time!" shrilled Lundeen.

"I look simply dreadful!" Mrs. Todd complained. "Couldn't you have brought my cosmetics along?"

"Plenty where we're going," Perry said. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I must catch up on my beauty rest."

He dozed right off. The tiny people and the dog all began barking at me, so I closed my eyes and ears and went to sleep.

It was just lunchtime when we landed in England. Dr. Perry put them into the overnight bag and closed it on Lundeen's yapping about carrying it carefully, and we disembarked — into a screaming, jostling mob, all pushing papers and pens at me for my autograph.

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"What is this all about?" I shouted at Perry.

"We wirelessed ahead," he shouted back. "Look at the headlines."

I did. The newspapers I was being asked to autograph read:

U. K. HAILS ARRIVAL
OF PRINCESS WAMBA

So I signed everything happily, enjoying every minute of it. When I looked up for Dr. Perry, I saw him surrounded by a flying wedge of soldiers.

"Where are you going?" I shrieked in alarm.

"To be debriefed," he yelled. "I'll ring you up when you're settled in."

And he was led away just as a Rolls-Royce came onto the field, and I was ushered inside and we drove off. Two men sat in the front seat, looking very formidable, and I jumped when a voice next to me said, "Allow me to introduce myself, Your Highness. I am Lord Fairfax."

"That's nice," I said, trying to see where Dr. Perry was being taken, but he disappeared from view. I turned around to Lord Fairfax and, "Why are he and I being separated?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Lord Fairfax.

"Then suppose we go back and pick him up and —."

"Oh, that would be militarily impossible!"

"What about my staying at his house?" I said nastily.

"Against protocol," he stated. "I'm sure Dr. Perry is a perfectly splendid host. But he is, after all, a commoner."

"Well, where *am* I staying?"

"Why, with me, to be sure. At my town house. I shall do everything possible to make your stay as pleasant as possible." He frowned. "That makes two 'possibles' in one sentence, doesn't it? Dreadfully sorry. Is there anything in particular you would like for luncheon?"

"Yes," I said. "Aardvark steak."

"I shall comb all London for one," he promised.

"And then," I said, "I want to go straight to Dr. Perry's house. Commoner or no commoner."

"Yes, Your Highness," Lord Fairfax said, retreating to his corner of the seat.

Unless you've been given the royal treatment, you can't imagine how busy it keeps you. I met Lord Fairfax's wife and servants, dozens of them, was assigned the East Wing of the manor, then lunched — on aardvark steak, courtesy of the zoo

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— and world-famous designers took my measurements for the most astonishing wardrobe, which I was most grateful for when it was delivered; London is awfully chilly that time of year, and I had only the clothes I wore when leaving home.

Then, when I was presentable, there were dinners, high teas, elevenses, a ball in my honor — and I was presented to King Charles and the entire court, which I had to be prepared for days in advance. His Majesty was most gracious and, as we used to say at Bennington, I got a real charge out of the whole royal business. Oh, and the ballet, the opera, the theater — I fell into bed every night, so exhausted but overstimulated that I said, "Who?" when Dr. Perry phoned, weeks later.

"Africa," he said. "Mlarki to London."

"Oh, the man with the moss!" I exclaimed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said guardedly. "I called to invite you to dinner."

I checked my date book. "I'm over my head with appointments — three magazine covers to pose for, two interviews, a profile, sessions with the person who's writing my autobiography —"

"Yes, yes," he said. "You're the hit of the season; can't open anything in print without seeing your face or by-line. Now when can we have dinner together?"

"Would some time next month do?"

"That depends on when you want to light a little bonfire," he said.

"Oh." I said. "That's different. I'll cancel everything. Just tell me the time and place."

"My home. Tomorrow night. Alone."

He gave me the address and hung up. Next night, Lord Halifax's chauffeur handed me out of the silver Rolls-Royce right on the dot. I told him to wait; I didn't expect a long visit, just dinner and burning the moss and home by ten. Dr. Perry himself opened the door, so promptly that I thought he'd been waiting for my ring. He sort of reeled back as I entered.

"Princess!" he cried. "I'd never have known you! You're dazzling!"

He stroked my sable coat a moment, before hanging it up. Then he led me to his little bar, and we had a little drinkie and then to dinner, which he told me he had cooked himself — and which he served himself.

"Are your chef and butler off for the evening?" I asked.

"Chef and butler?" He laughed himself red in the face. "I don't even have a wife or mistress!" he said, coughing.

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I shuddered inwardly as I remembered my insistence on staying at his house. Imagine all these weeks without servants — and a bachelor's flat at that! But I kept up my end of the conversation, which was mostly about my adventures in London, until I could decently mention the moss.

He finished his wine, a very ordinary *vin ordinaire,* and took me to his little laboratory at the rear of the house. "There!" he said, picking up a little chafing dish kind of thing and handing it to me. "It is yours to do with as you wish!"

"It seems like such a little bit of moss," I said.

"I give you my word that it's exactly the same amount we started with."

I laughed with girlish glee as I set fire to it. "Well, that's that," I said. "Now how about Prof. Kropotkin's moss?"

"Everything is arranged," he said. "There will be a Soviet plane to take you to Moscow at noon tomorrow. Kropotkin will be among the delegation to meet you."

"It's so terribly sudden," I said. "I have to call off so many appointments. How can I do it with so little notice?"

"You'll find a way," he told me. "You do want to see your husband and father, don't you?"

And so I spent a sleepless night writing excuses and a hurried morning phoning those I couldn't write to. Then I thanked the Fairfaxes, gave each servant a handsome gratuity, and was at the airport with 15 minutes to spare, complete with the fantastic wardrobe I had accumulated in London with my personal appearances and endorsements.

I slept aboard the plane and nodded through the reception at Moscow, until Prof. Kropotkin came into view among the high dignitaries. I shook his hand and asked when I could destroy the moss.

"First you must give us equal time with England," he said jovially.

So I lived in the Kremlin, reviewed the military might, walking, riding or being dragged through Red Square — from Lenin's tomb, of course — inspected factories, appeared at ballet, theater, opera, on TV and in the newspapers and magazines. I made a great hit when I said, "If I weren't a princess, there is nothing I would rather be than a commoner in London or Moscow."

For the sake of brevity, let me state simply that between those two great capitals, I was worn skinny before they let me visit Kropotkin for dinner and moss-burning. Then I flew back to

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Mlarki and home. At last! But would my husband, the Head Witch Doctor, and my father, the Super Chief, welcome me as gladly as had Moscow and London?

"You've burned it all?" my husband asked.

"Every bit Kropotkin and Perry had," I told them.

They both put their arms around me. As I dabbed at my eyes, I saw Prof. Todd grinning crookedly down at me. We shook hands enthusiastically and he said, "My lab's gone to pot since you left. Want to come back?"

I nodded, too overcome by emotion to speak.

And that, I innocently thought, was that.

But Todd and my two men toured the whole gigantic compound with me in the tribal Jeep, where I was shown everybody talking back to phonographs that were talking to them in English and other languages, and then to the airfield, where they showed me Pigmies learning to fly planes.

"What on Earth is going on?" I asked blankly.

"We Pigmies are about to take our rightful places," the Super Chief said — in perfectly good English! When I commented on that, he said, "You can't beat the phonograph to teach foreign languages."

"*All* of us?" I said.

"Every man, woman and child," the Head Witch Doctor replied. "We are going to bring peace to the world."

"When?" I asked. "How?"

"You'll know when before anybody else." said Prof. Todd. "The how will be explained in an article I'm writing for the British medical magazine *Lancet*."

And that was all I could get out of them. I doubted if my husband and father knew how it all would come about, for I plagued them with questions. But why would I know before anybody else?

Some months later, when I was reluctantly tuning in my radio, which had been bristling with every nation threatening its neighbors, I heard only silence. Puzzled, I changed the batteries, then turned the dials slowly. Nothing! From nearby Mlarki to the farthest Greenland — not a sound, not a voice!

When I told this to my husband, he suggested telling Prof. Todd. I did, panting from running to his hut.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "I said you would be the first to know. Now we must assemble all the tribes and put Plan C into effect!"

"What were Plan A and Plan B?" I asked in bewilderment.

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"Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin," he explained on the run.

"What *about* them?" I yelled, but he was out of earshot.

He had been heading for the meeting hut. I followed him. By the time I reached it, sirens were blaring all over the compound. Everybody came from everywhere and raced to the meeting hut.

Inside, Prof. Todd was standing at a lectern at the front of the huge auditorium, waiting for all of us to take our seats. His grin was more crooked than I had ever seen it. The Super Chief and the Head Witch Doctor were seated behind him, facing the audience. He beckoned to me to sit with them. As I obeyed, the bustle ceased. Every eye was on him.

"Brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews," he said, "The day has come! We have labored long and hard for this moment. Every one of you, including the children, knows English, and most of you know another language besides, as well as the history, customs and economics of the country you have been assigned to. We must move swiftly to bring order out of the chaos the world is in. Can we do it?"

"Yes!" the crowd roared.

"Good, good," he said. "Now let's line up according to continent."

"What about us?" I asked my husband.

"We're the Supreme Arbiters," he said. "Didn't the Professor tell you how we've been organizing ourselves?"

"Not a word," I answered. "We've been busy experimenting on all kinds of vegetation."

"With what results?"

"None," I said. "Not a thing."

"That's wonderful!" cried my father. "Absolutely wonderful!"

"*What's* wonderful?" I asked in complete confusion. "Why won't anyone tell me what this is all about?"

Prof. Todd had turned toward us, listening and grinning. "Please join me in leading the parade to the airfield," he said, "and I'll explain on the way."

We fell into step with him. Suddenly I remembered running after him, when my stride was five to his one. Now — I compared him with my two men and realized what I had not noticed, the change had been so gradual. Prof. Todd was mere inches taller than them, instead of almost two feet, and our strides were just about equal!"

"You guessed it, Princess," he said cheerfully. "Every living thing on Earth — except vegetation — is on its way toward becoming a tenth of its former size!"

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"The moss?" I asked. He nodded. "But I destroyed it all!"

"Token amounts," he said. Just enough to keep you from nwittingly spoiling Plan C."

"You haven't explained Plan and Plan B," I said, angry at eing made a mere puppet.

"Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin id what I wanted them to do," e said. "They turned over the ıoss and the tiny people and ogs to their military, who imıediately saw its strategic value. 'heir nations grew the moss as ast as it would grow — which is henomenally when exposed to ght hydroponic tanks — and hared it with their allies. When hey had enough of it they spir:ed it into the streams, rivers, akes and reservoirs of their enmies. There isn't one single piece f land, from all the continents o the tiniest island, that isn't logged with it."

"But how did they *do* it?" I sked.

"Tourists," he said.

"And what is Plan C?"

"To take over the world." He aughed teasingly. "But first, et's get your people distributed."

There were many bush planes ın the airfield, which were loaded ıccording to ultimate destination, ınd flown to Mlarki by Pigmy ›ilots, where supersonic jets tood waiting, also manned by Pigmies. Each jet had its destinations clearly marked and filled up with people who knew exactly where they were going, and why, and what they were to do there.

Except me.

I found my hand being shaken while my husband and father took turns hugging me and saying good-by. "Wait!" I wailed. "I don't know what's expected of me! And when will I see my two men again?"

"The Pigmies assigned to each nation are responsible to you, the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief," said Todd, finally letting go of my hand. "You'll see them both two weeks a year, on your vacations."

"With pay!" added my father.

"And what will you do?" I asked Prof. Todd.

"Go back to the specimens we gathered, an experiment rudely interrupted," he said. "But I'll need a lab scaled down to the size I'll soon be."

"Don't grieve," my husband said comfortingly. "It's the noblest job a people can have, bringing peace and justice to the world. Anyhow, we'll be talking by telephone as often as the budget will allow."

"And will I always be your Number One Wife?" I asked fearfully.

"Always," he said.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

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We all took separate planes and I was whooshed to New York and my deluxe suit at the Waldorf-Astoria, where, looking out the fourth-floor window, I can see the people scurrying like the warrior ants of my native Africa.

There. I think the story is complete. Prof. Todd asked me to write it for posterity, and he has been waiting patiently for me to finish it. He wants to add a few words. Prof. Todd:

Thank you, Princess Wamba.

I find the forgoing extremely accurate, but a little unclear about Plan C. I wasn't trying to tease Her Highness or create suspense; there were just too many details and getting people into their proper planes to allow me to explain Plan C.

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To put it as briefly as possib it consists of the Pigmies acti as Governors General, each aidi his assigned country to make t transformation to an environme ten times too large for it, with t Princess, Super Chief and He Witch Doctor acting as Supre Arbiters in disputes between cou tries, which have been predictat few. We tiny people were ove whelmed by the immensity of o environments — our tenfold abun ance of food and housing and clot ing, metals and minerals and fue and our suddenly adequate mea of transportation — everythin Only the Pigmies, of all the wor were not stupefied by the chan

Princess Wamba has asked m What about the danger of war? which I can openly reply, Wi what? Weapons we tiny people ca operate? Warplanes we can't fl Besides, who needs somebody els territory and resources when su denly there is ten times as much everything?

But what about later, you as after the transition is complet

By that time, Pigmy rule will solidly entrenched. And what Pigm would let his country go to w against a brother Pigmy's?

Moreover, it's remarkable ev now how possessive each count feels about its Pigmy Governor Ge eral. Why shouldn't they? After a Pigmies, being the only creatures Earth who were immune to t moss, are the biggest people Earth.

Now doesn't everything work o wonderfully?

H. L. GOLD

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Understanding

by GEORGE O. SMITH

Illustrated by DORFMAN

One boy can't cope with a planet filled with enemies — unless he has a dog . . . and Understanding!

I

Scholar's Cluster is a globular aggregation of about a quarter of a million stars, so young a cluster that it has no visible sign of dispersion. Its stars are heavy with the metals created in earlier novae, and the stellar population is high with the middle-sequence suns centering around Types F, G and K.

More important, Scholar's Cluster got its name from its own mysterious environment. Studying there will not make a scholar of a dolt nor a genius of a straight-A student, but studying there will guarantee that each will be educated to his maximum ability to absorb knowledge. Once this end is reached, there is no point in remaining — for exactly the same reason that one stops pouring when the gallon measure has taken on four quarts.

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Scholar's Cluster was a going operation when Earth attained the stars, and took her place among the galactic cultures; and Earth, like the myriad of other galactic cultures, sends her brighest to her educational colony on one of the pleasanter planets that revolves about a G-3 star not much different than Sol.

While this is not an account of Scholar's Cluster, Scholar's Cluster is important to the adventures of young Terence Lincoln, for Scholar's Cluster lies toward the center of the Galaxy, a few thousand light-years to the inward side of the sprawling empire of Xanabar.

It is the existence of Scholar's Cluster that placed young Terence Lincoln on the spot in Xanabar. Otherwise, he would hardly have been so far from home . . . .

Terry Lincoln skylarked through the streets of Coleban, one of the capital cities of Xanabar, with a babble of his classmates. They were stopping over in Xanabar on their way home to Mother Earth. They all had fine grades from primary school and were all looking forward to the three-month vacation before returning to enter secondary school: neither success, nor freedom, nor the City of Coleban itself did anything t dampen their exuberance.

Lincoln and his classmate bracketed age fifteen.

So all of them were on th verge of, but none of them ha yet crossed, the big line betwee adolescence and maturity. Tha is, none of them had gained Un derstanding.

Without Understanding, th gold and the glitter of Colebai was pure crystal-cut of proof per fect, and the stopover was simpl a matter of imperfect spacelin scheduling. With Understanding they would have labelled Colebai as a tourist trap and realize that the stopover was a conditio for interstellar license throug Xanabar so that those who pass ed through could be parted fron a measure of their wealth.

Still, those who disdainfull label Coleban tinsel and dam the whole of Xanabar are hardl fair.

For the shops of Coleban dis played to their very best the mos attractive wares of ten thousan worlds. The universal diamond sapphire and emerald are com monplace; second rate to th star-drop of Manark, the frau land of Selira that shines of it own internal light or the glorious oyster-pearl of Earth, that is said to lose its luster if it does no lie upon the throat of a woma in love. There were fabrics so

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delicate that they could be worn but once and others so durable that they would outlast their makers. There were tools to fit the hands of a thousand worlds, knives that could split the hair or cleave plate armor with equal facility; instruments with gleaming dial and engraved calibration.

And there were animated displays.

These caught young Terry Lincoln's eye. He was a gamesman. The displays were programmed by master artisans to show the finer points and the flashy parts, and done with an ease that convinced the onlooker that he, too, could gain such skill with a little practice. Time and again, Terry found himself rapt as his companions moved onward.

And each time he had to make his way through a bedlam of humanity to regain his companions.

Humanity came in an assortment of sizes from a small meter and a half to a stalwart two meters plus, and in a bracket of weights to match the skinny and the gross in each height class. Humanity's color varied from peppermint white to deep chocolate, with side flavors of saffron, tints of lemon and the reds from pale pink to ruddy. There were the usual superficial differences in the makeup of the hands and some startling facial arrangements, but they were all of Humanity — and they all had two things in common:

They were all oxygen-breathing, water-based, hydrocarbon life with red blood and omnivorous appetites — and they all had Understanding, for Understanding is the mature way of life for those whose culture has attained the stars.

That Terry Lincoln and his classmates lacked this important common denominator mattered not. His was a people who had attained Understanding, and he and his companions were on the verge.

Without Understanding, the babble of tongues about him was babble indeed. This did not bother him. One day he, too, would attain it, and all would become clear. For this moment of celebration, all babble was noise; and Lincoln could not have cared less whether the Humanity about him was echoing in their own way his own appreciation of the glitter of City Coleban or talking about him as an object of interest.

Lincoln paused to watch a display of a game that combined the intricacy and plotting of chess with the speed and precision of hockey played on ice. It was a demonstration skillfully programmed so that even the youths

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without Understanding could follow the play.

Rapt, young Terry watched until the game, again by skillful program, came to a brilliant climax of high-speed master-moves that ended with one player downed in ignominious defeat. The close of this action was followed by a sales pitch in the tongue of Xanabar, which, of course, any one with Understanding could follow. To Terry, it was babble, and so he turned to say —

"That was quite a — "

— only to find that his companions had left him and were now turning the corner far along the street.

Terry turned to follow. As he turned, the sales pitch stopped and a new demonstration began with appropriate announcements. His move to leave was blocked by a strong centripetal movement toward the exhibition. While he bucked this inward movement, his classmates turned the corner and were gone from sight.

This bothered Terry very lightly; he knew he could make his way through this crowd and rejoin his companions. But the crowd that thronged the streets of Coleban had one more Human attribute: They were egocentric. They blocked his path and barked at him in the tongues of the Galaxy. They did not step aside nor help, nor seem to care that he was trying to make haste for a very good reason.

Indeed, there seemed a perverse delight in their operations, as if they found it pleasant to block this rash youth who lacked Understanding. Openings closed as he approached. Strangers paused to speak to one another in the narrowest of ways. Pedestrian traffic, supposed to walk on the left by the Law of Xanabar, filled the right-hand pedestrian lanes in the wrong direction. That others, trying to make their way in Terry's direction, were also blocked and frustrated did not make Terry's lot any easier.

Then came the inevitable incident. Terry espied an opening between two walkers and started through, only to plunge headlong into a saffron-colored man of gross proportions who had filled the gap. Terry hit and bounced backward to land with a jarring thud on the base of his spine.

The saffron-colored one laughed harshly, displaying a mouth full of disgustingly bad teeth. To finish this picture, the saffron-colored one had covered his visibly unbathed body with one of the gaudiest costumes to walk the streets of Coleban.

Angered, Terry Lincoln arose and hit the line with a plunge that had gained him much yard-

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age on the playing fields of Scholar's Cluster — and once more bounced. This time the saffron-colored one kicked Terry in the ribs as he stepped over the lad to disappear in the crowd.

This was the last straw. It was time to forget that politeness was a gentlemanly trait and time to get where he was going.

Starting with a brisk walk, and slowly accelerating into a dog-trot, Terry Lincoln zigged and zagged and darted, making long end runs around phalanxes of people and driving himself between others that showed no more than half enough space. Soon he was in a semi-gallop, making wide swings here and taking a shortcut through an open alleyway there.

He lost his sense of direction and, being young, forgot the name of the game he'd set out to win because there was a more frantic game at hand. Terry became turned around and continued to plunge through the crowd in the direction away from his local home base, the spaceport and its wall of hotels, conveniently provided by Coleban for the enforced lay-overs.

He did not notice that the high polish was no longer about him, nor that the crowd was less dense. He had passed the unmarked boundary of the center city and was now passing through the borderland, that ring that lies between the polish and the blight.

Then came the second incident. Once more, Terry tried to plunge between two who walked a bit apart, and once more he hit gross weight and bounced.

Once more the same saffron face with its mouth full of rotting teeth laughed at him, but this time the ugly one made a grab for Terry, bear-hugged the youth and smothered Terry's mouth in the foul-smelling gaudy garment. Terry flailed, kicked the other's shins and broke free. Blindly Terry swung and missed. Then his training rose to the surface, and he squared away. He led with his left and came forward with a right cross that should have made its mark but failed to connect. Saffron-face countered with an open-handed chop that Terry blocked with his forearm. It stunned all feeling from lower arm and hand.

Once more saffron-face made his grab, but this time Terry wasn't having any. He managed to connect one shoulder-driven right jab that mashed the saffron mouth, broke off a few jagged stumps of the rotten teeth, and brought a quick flow of blood to the stranger's mouth.

Terry turned and ran, then made a wide curve that outdis-

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tanced the saffron one's attempt to catch him. Terry proceeded once more in the direction his faulty sense said led toward home base: the spaceport and its hotels. Behind him in full chase came the gross one, surprisingly limber for that much visible flab.

Ultimately, youth outdistanced the man, and Terry paused for breath.

About him was slumland. Trash littered the sidewalks, and filth filled the gutter. Windows were nearly all cracked to some degree, many were broken and stuffed with dirty cloth, others were completely out and covered from within with some sort of reclaimed sheeting or discarded building material.

The air smelled of rancid grease, vegetables that had been cooked far too long and the unclean smell of the blight area. Dusk had begun, and the streetlights had come on to cast a wholly incompetent, wan glow. Under one were street urchins playing at some game of dice. Two girls in too-tight and very sleazy dresses passed Terry and spoke to him brashly; he did not need Understanding to know what they had in mind. His silence was greeted by more vulgarities, which attracted the attention of the dice-players. Two, obviously winners, deserted the game for the girls.

Still, Terry plodded on, for he recalled that the transit had passed overhead of some grubby-looking areas on its way from spaceport to center city.

And so he continued, confident that beyond this barrier of blight lay the spaceport he sought.

II

The name was Homburg. On the wall before him was an illuminated map of the city, with tiny moving lights to show what action was taking place. Below the map were a series of small videoscreens with scenes of the city taken from marked vantage points.

The special-colored starred cross that marked the position of Terry Lincoln, and the thin dot-dash line that marked his path, showed him almost diametrically opposite to the spaceport and moving away.

Homburg pressed a button on his desk. On the small screen above the instrument the saffron-colored face appeared. Homburg said, "That was well executed, Bod Zimmer."

Zimmer said, "Zer Homburg, am I relieved? I wish very much to get out of this filthy disguise."

"You are relieved, Bod Zimmer. You will be rewarded."

A snap, and Zimmer's face disappeared.

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Homburg eyed the map and noted that the mark that represented Terry was still moving away from center city and the spaceport on the far side. Satisfied, he arose from his desk and went down the hallway outside to another office. He merely nodded to the secretary in the outer office as he stepped briskly across the room to the closed door. But it was with visible deference that he rapped on the inner door, waited perceptibly, and only after there was no objection turned the knob and entered.

To the man behind the desk, Homburg said, "Zer Martell, phase one is completed."

Martell looked up. "Successfully, Bod Homburg?"

"Quite," replied Homburg, concealing his disappointment. He'd hoped that this success would move his superior to drop the title *bod* which one used on an inferior. Had this been done, Homburg would no longer be required to address his superior by the title *zer* and could address him without title as an equal.

"Very well," said Martell. "Now, whether you sleep tonight at all, you will remain on duty until the call comes from the Terrestrial spacecraft that one of their number is missing."

"Yes, Zer Martell."

"It will be routed to your office. Take the call just as if your assignment was to take such calls and act upon them. They need not know — indeed, they must not know that they are dealing with a member of the personal staff of the Master Peacekeeper of Xanabar."

"Yes, Zer Martell."

"And then, Bod Homburg, see that this incident is properly and promptly reported to the Terrestrial Agency at once."

"This will place the agent Peter Hawley and the dog Beauregarde in the operation, Zer Martell."

"Precisely."

"I fail to see — "

"Bod Homburg, that pair have a mutual Understanding that surpasses any that I have ever seen. I hope that we may gain some insight into this superior Understanding by separating them. Once the Terrestrial agent is notified and the operators move into action, you will give the signal to execute phase two. Understood?"

"I will give the signal as you order, but I fail to understand why all of this is necessary."

"Were we to separate them by force, there would be repercussions. To slay one of them would only serve to have the slain one replaced by another whose way of operating would be unfamiliar to us, and it would infuriate the remaining one to a degree that

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only an irate Terrestrial can achieve. Now, Bod Homburg, were you able to understand the reason for this complicated operation, you would be sitting in this office instead of me."

"Zer Martell! I would never think of replacing you."

"You never will," said Martell coldly. "The day you enter this office will be the day I appoint you to it, for then I shall sit where Zer Doktur sits today and I shall still be your superior. So now begone and prepare for the next phase."

In Terrestrial terms, it would have been between two-thirty and three o'clock in the morning. The streets of Coleban were deserted save for some cleaning women and porters and a very few others. Of the masses of humanity who had come seeking their own particular brand of happiness, some had found it and others had not; in either case they were elsewhere.

The "others" included a sight seldom seen this far from Mother Earth, for no other planet has anything that resembles the Terrestrial canine.

Beauregarde led, his nose close to the ground and his plume waving cheerfully as he plied one of his talents. He was tracking the scent of Young Terry Lincoln.

Beauregarde is hard to describe because he does not resemble any of the standard breeds. Dog, short-haired, brown with darker lines around the eyes, well muscled, seventy to eighty pounds. In short, Beauregarde the dog looked like a dog because his parents were dogs, but here the association with *canis vulgaris* ceases.

For Beauregarde had the dog's version of Understanding. He was of a long line of dogs bred for Understanding and for the latent intelligence of the canine, instead of size or shape or something equally superficial. Understanding has been a canine trait ever since man and dog shared the campfire and divided the day's kill. As a consequence, it is hardly surprising that Beauregarde's measure of Understanding was greater in any area where Peter Hawley was concerned.

Peter followed the dog at a little distance. He, too, is hard to describe because he, like Beauregarde, is pure mongrel. Still, Peter Hawley carried himself with a jaunty air as if he owned the sidewalk where he trod: a lithe and slender thirtyish with plenty of bounce in his step and a smile on his face. The smile was either cheerful rogue or downright insolence depending upon which side the observer took with regard to Peter. His hair was dark sandy,

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and his eyes were blue. His complexion was a healthy wind-burned tan, but mostly artificially induced since Peter's assigned task was to pursue and apprehend villains, and villainy is mostly done in the dark.

The dog paused, circled tightly, resniffed and said, "Young Lincoln stood here for quite a while, shuffling back and forth as if he were watching something."

The dog's voice was far from Oxford. It was a well controlled whine and whinny, with chest sounds adding bass with a well modulated growl or a low rumble. The lips and tongue were sufficiently mobile to give fair articulation. Understanding supplied the remainder of Beauregarde's communication system.

Peter looked around. "The kid's school file said that he was a bit of a gamesman. Maybe that one caught him." Peter indicated the game that Lincoln had stopped to watch. It was dormant now that there were no potential customers, but Peter knew of the game and how it was displayed. "Anything else?" he asked Beauregarde.

"Well, the rest didn't wait up for him."

Peter nodded. "I don't suppose that educated sniffer of yours will tell us whether this is where they got separated?"

"No. But I wouldn't be against this as the place," said Beauregarde. "I think I scent repeaters."

"Repeaters? Well, now, that makes it a grabbing instead of a little boy lost, and that makes more sense except for the big puzzler of why."

"Why?" repeated the dog. "Isn't half of our job retrieving either Terrestrial loot or Terrestrials themselves that have been grabbed by the citizens of Xanabar?"

"Yes," grinned Peter. "But it's usually toothsome young females that they grab, not fifteen-year-old males, which are a drug on any flesh market."

"How so?"

"Beauregarde, a youth of fifteen is one hundred and thirty-odd pounds of misdirected energy, walking on two left feet in an uncertain gait in the wrong direction. Its path is marked by a two-year trail of broken glass, dirty shoes, unfinished projects, unread books and undone homework. He is as cooperative as a mule when anything constructive is needed and filled with burning ambition when what must be done is completely beyond his capability. And — "

" — in other words, who'd want one?"

"That's about it."

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"Well, there must be some reason. Even the citizens of Xanabar do not grab for the simple sake of grabbing."

"You're thinking of ransom?"

"Well?" asked the dog.

Peter shook his head. "Whilst you were getting your snoot full of Lincoln's scent, I was going through the folder from the kid's school record. There simply isn't anything negotiable in Lincoln's background. His folks have neither money nor position that would make a caper like this worthwhile. Oh, young Lincoln is bright enough to earn a sponsored ticket to Scholar's Cluster, but the citizens of Xanabar aren't swiping adolescent brains with half an education and no Understanding."

"Not without some reason," insisted Beauregarde.

"You're a bloody pragmatist," said Peter. "And you're so right. That's what bothers me."

"That I'm right?"

"No. What bothers me is not that you're right, but that this operation smells highly of something complicated, with the bait concealed. Jinks, if they wanted to grab him, they've got enough characters in this play to fold up the pavement around him and cart him off. Instead — they play games. I don't get it; what I don't like is being too dense to see."

"So?"

"So we walk very carefully, carrying our dish extremely level, making neither wave nor surface ripple until we get to the bottom of this mess."

Beauregarde gave a short bark; in human it would have been a snort.

"Peter," said the dog, "I lack the imagination to visualize the scene in which Peter Hawley handles the delicate situation with velvet gloves, whilst Beauregarde lies with chops on forepaws and watches through heavy-lidded eyes."

They went on — and on — and on until Beauregarde snorted and dog-sneezed. "Oof," he said. "Your opinion of overaged fish is pleasantly aromatic compared to this."

"What goes?"

"Something — someone — who stinks. Reeks. Awful."

"Humph. Well, Beau, the caper makes a pattern, but the prize is still hidden."

"You mean this smelly character makes sense?"

"I'll bet a nice well hung raw steak against one, charcoal singed on the outside, that this smelly party was also clad in a costume that couldn't be forgotten in a lifetime."

"But why?"

"Well, observe that we are nearing the edge of the fancy

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part of Coleban. Here we have an incident that marks one of the opposition in the young man's mind. Not long from now, there will be another, with the same offensive party. This will convince Lincoln that he is not a mere victim of circumstance, but the central figure in a plot. He will therefore take off on a dead gallop. Subtly the opposition will change their tactics and start to block his way in the direction they want him to go, leaving their cover loose so that he thinks he is gaining while all the time he is going in the direction they want him to go. Catch?"

"Yes, but why?"

"Well, Beau, take a look. We're about to leave the area of polished metal, reflection-free glass and marked-up prices. We're on the edge of the honky-tonk, the flashy vurguzz-mill and the joint with the fifty beautiful hostesses, fifty. Unless the target is not distracted, he will observe this distressing side of City Coleban and take sensible measures. Distracted, he will plunge on and on, deeper and deeper into enemy territory."

"That is a lot to deduce from a few dog-scents," said Beauregarde.

"Sure it is. But I've been in Xanabar long enough to figure out most of their operations. In fact, the only thing that bothers me is this one. With the crew they have on board, simply grabbing a kid should be as easy as — er —"

"— Scratching your ear with your hind foot?" asked Beauregarde.

"Yeah . . ." said Peter absently. "And even without your talented sniffer, I smell the unmistakable smell of Peacekeeper, about to arrive in a cloud of indignation."

Beauregarde made a gesture of sniffing at the air. "I agree," he said. "And now, Peter, take your own advice. Treat this delicate situation delicately. The velvet gloves, remember? The level dish and the careful walk? I shall observe through heavy-lidded eyes with jaw on poised forepaws, the picture of contentment."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Peter.

"Ah, how quickly passes the moment of passive acceptance. Peter, your adrenalin count is rising admirably to this occasion. But please, don't make me bite him. I detest the taste of raw Peacekeeper."

III

In full, colorful regalia, the Peacekeeper of Xanabar approached with the customary hail: "What goes on in Xanabar?"

"Nothing of interest to you, Peacekeeper."

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"You are Peter Hawley, and this is the dog, Beauregarde."

"That is a brilliant deduction since we both are quite well known. And since we are equally well known as lawful folk, we will continue on our way."

"You are a troublemaker, with the reputation of disturbing the peace of Xanabar. Now, exactly what business brings you to the center of Coleban at this unreasonable hour of the morning?"

"I am walking my dog."

"Do not be insolent!"

"Then do not make noises like an imbecile. You know damned well that a Terrestrial youth, Terence Lincoln, dropped out of touch in this region not too many hours ago."

"The Peacekeepers of Xanabar have the situation well in hand. We need no intervention from outsiders."

"The Peacekeepers of Xanabar have the situation loused up as usual," said Peter testily. "Any outfit that can't find a fifteen-year-old male Terrestrial without Understanding needs some outside help."

"Finding the missing youth is Peacekeeper business."

"Business seems to be failing. Now go fly your kite."

"You will not be permitted to meddle in the affairs of Xanabar."

"We're not meddling," snapped Peter. "We're merely doing what your whole outfit can't do. So now get out of my way."

"You may not order me around."

"Want to bet?"

"Peter," said Beauregarde quietly, "remember your own advice. Be kind to our web-footed friend."

"Ah, yes," said Peter. "I'm being impulsive. We need not walk roughshod over the Peacekeepers of Xanabar, need we? So, since he will not stand aside and let us on about our business, we will go around. Right, Beau?"

"Right," said Beauregarde. The dog started to circle the Peacekeeper to one side while Peter circled the Peacekeeper to the other. He in the middle tried to keep his eyes on both, which resulted in a back-and-forth snap of the head as the encirclement increased. Finally the patience of the Peacekeeper blew sky high.

"Stop this!" he shouted, reaching for his side-arm.

Beauregarde stopped circling. He faced the Peacekeeper and dropped low into an alert crouch. The strong muscles stood out as he hunched himself for a spring; the scruff stood high and stiff, and from the deep throat came the growl of the Terrestrial dog in last-ditch warning.

The growl disturbed the Peacekeeper.

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Peter said, "He means that. You touch the pea-shooter, and Beauregarde will have your forearm in bloody shreds before it clears the holster."

"You dare not threaten me!" bellowed the Peacekeeper.

"I'm not threatening you," said Peter calmly. "I'm merely telling you what will happen if you start playing with hardware."

"Peter," asked Beauregarde, "can't we arbitrate this? I'm not really hungry, and the last Peacekeeper I ate was stringy."

"Now see here — "

Peter waved a hand. In it was a banknote, a pleasantly sized denomination in crystal-cut, the currency of Xanabar. "This, Peacekeeper, is not a bribe, for I know better than to bribe the Peacekeepers of Xanabar. Instead, it is payment for a fine in advance. From long experience, I know what it costs to cut a caper in Xanabar; this is payment in advance for a bit of disturbed peace, possibly a cracked skull or two, and the usual treatment for numerous scars, mars, abrasions, shock and dogbite. I further offer you some good advice. Find some overparked automobiles to ticket on the next block over and stay out of harm's way — "

In a normal flap in Xanabar, Peter might well have gotten away with it. He had before. But this Peacekeeper had his orders, and his script had been prepared by Zer Upstairs.

The mobile riot squad converged upon them like a swarm of locusts. They arrived in a squeal of tires and brakes, in the thunder of copter blades, the nerve-wracking hiss of jets; and the horizon-wide clangor of bells and whistles, the howl of two-toned hee-haw-horns and the wail of sirens. With them came the blinding glare of searchlight and parachute flare.

Peter and the Peacekeeper were caught in the glare. In Peter's upheld hand shone the unmistakable rectangles of green and gold, the crystal-cut of Xanabar. The tableau could hardly have been improved as it was, but the Peacekeeper capped this climax. He struck at Peter's hand in visible indignation and shouted righteously: "You cannot bribe the Peacekeeper of Xanabar!"

He drew back and reached for his side-arm.

Beauregarde growled warningly and crouched once more. But Peter Hawley said, "Play it cool, Beau. You track Terry Lincoln, find him, keep him safe and bring him home alive. I'll deal with this native uprising."

Beauregarde said, "I hear you, Peter. I'll bring him home alive,

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unharmed and probably with Understanding."

At which point the dog turned swiftly and pranced away. His first leap was a sudden spring that barely grazed the Peacekeeper. He landed on his forepaws and then folded into an arch that brought the hind feet between and before the front; then he unwound into a long arrowing bound forward. Like an accordion, Beauregarde alternately folded and unfolded as he raced with four-footed agility through the dazzled members of the converging force. There was a flurry of flashguns, the hiss of needle beams, the throbbing grunt of stunners and the pulsating shaft of nerve shockers, but the Peacekeepers of Xanabar were hardly in practice, especially in taking snap shots at any target that moved as fast as *canus terrestrialis* in a hurry. Beauregarde made the corner untouched and turned it in a flurry of scrabbling paws on the hard pavement. Then he was gone.

Beauregarde was not touched, but the innocent bystanders had not fared well. Four of the Peacekeepers were writhing and moaning on the hard pavement; two were clutching the burnholes from needlers; and the assortment of stun-guns and nerve shockers had taken their toll from a full freeze that left the victim in the awkward configuration of an ill-contrived statue toppled to earth to lesser attacks that immobilized arm, leg, pelvis or other mobile joints.

Ignoring the mess his fellows had made of themselves by their marksmanship, the uniformed Peacekeeper advanced upon Peter Hawley. "Will you come quietly?" he asked, in a voice that clearly indicated that he hoped that Peter might resist — ever so little — so that he could chill the Terrestrial agent and have him hauled in stiff.

Peter chuckled jauntily. "Sure," he said, in a tone and in a manner that he knew to make the average Peacekeeper long for the return of the knout, the scourge and the rack. "Sure," he repeated. "Your office is better than mine to call — because at yours I can register a formal complaint. May I walk — or must you show your mastery of the situation by freezing me stiff and clamping me in manacles to boot?"

"Just come quietly," said the Peacekeeper, almost able to conceal the seething boil that threatened to erupt.

Homburg reported, "Zer Martell, phase two is now complete.

"As planned?"

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"Almost precisely. Very few deviations."

Martel eyed his subordinate carefully. "And how many were told?"

"Peacekeeper Veckten, of necessity. He was essential to the operation. And master marksmen Randor and Wotane."

"That is all?"

"That is all, Zer Martell."

"That was well done, Bod Homburg."

"Zer — ?"

"Yes?"

"Zer Martell, would it not be proper to reward — somehow — those who had to be dropped by Randor and Wotane lest they harm the dog Beauregarde? It strikes me that — "

"You are not thinking well, Bod Homburg. Those who know must be rewarded — unobtrusively — for their performance. To reward those whose zealous defense of the Peace of Xanabar might have defeated our program would only cause puzzlement. Despite the odium of having some of our citizens think that we Peacekeepers are so poor in marksmanship that we hit our own instead of that devil-dog Beauregarde, the fewer in the know the better. Oh, well, just see — unobtrusively — that the victims are warmly rewarded upon the first time that they do something to warrant attention."

"I understand everything you have said so far."

"Good. Now, attend to phase three. Beauregarde and young Lincoln are to be harassed and isolated, but not harmed. I must have a detailed report upon their operations here in Coleban."

"Zer?"

"Yes?"

"Zer Martell, you speak as if it were a foregone conclusion that the dog Beauregarde will track the youth Lincoln through the streets of Coleban, meet him and join forces."

"You are quite correct," said Martell. "The idea is fantastic — until the record is examined. Peter Hawley and Beauregarde have an awesome record of trailing those missing persons whose lithe young bodies are coveted by some of our unruly citizens. I'm told that this is done by following the scent left by the person, but I'd as soon profess to believe in free-running telepathy. But fact is fact, and the record stands."

"And you believe that Beauregarde will meet Lincoln."

"I may have hazarded my position and my future upon that premise, Bod Homburg, but believe me, I seldom gamble for high stakes. I may play for them, but I do not gamble, if you understand the difference in meaning."

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IV

Terence Lincoln, with the full, misplaced confidence that he was on the right trail, walked deeper and deeper into the slumland of Coleban, fully convinced that not far beyond this squalor was the spaceport. His watch, set to the local chronology at the spaceport as he and his comrades debarked, told him that his spacecraft had taken off. That bothered him not. His was the confidence of the brash youth whose experience is not extensive enough to convince him that there are things of which he damned well might be afraid.

So he walked onward, with a fair sense of direction now that he was no longer heckled — this fair sense of direction keeping him on the proper course albeit in the wrong direction.

He had, as he saw it, two alternatives. He could either continue until he made it all the way to the spaceport, or he could meet up with one of the gaudily uniformed Peacekeepers of Xanabar. In either case, it would be no more than a mere explanation of his plight, a time check the veracity of his tale of woe, and then a quick return to his former status — one or two ships of passage behind and a fine story to embellish in the retelling.

Even in the slumland of Coleban, one cannot wander on forever without encountering a Peacekeeper, even though the Peacekeepers of Xanabar generally stay where the action is.

And so young Terry espied one of the gold-braided Keepers of Xanabar's Peace and took heart. For Terry had been taught that policemen were as dedicated to the business of helping those in need as they were to the game of pursuing the ungodly. That he lacked Understanding was a point in his favor, for the Peacekeeper should realize that he was an outlander who needed help.

With the ingrained ability of the public servant to turn in the wrong direction, the Peacekeeper rounded a corner instead of turning and coming toward Terry. The lad broke into a run lest he lose sight of the public protector. He rounded the corner in a dead run, caught sight of the uniform and raced onward until he almost skidded into the backside of the Peacekeeper.

The Peacekeeper turned at the sound of the running feet. He turned to face the oncoming Terry, and he smiled.

And Terry Lincoln came to a sliding halt, reversed his direction adroitly, and then proceeded to use his best high-speed energy.

For the Peacekeeper, in the

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full regalia of a middlearchy of Xanabar's force, was none other than saffron-face. He had been relieved of his odious role and restored to rank, but there was no change in his face, his attitude, or his demeanor.

As Terry raced away, the Peacekeeper's hand-whistle shrilled, and the shout he delivered did not need any Understanding to decipher.

Once more, Terry eluded a group that swarmed down to encircle him. He raced through the slumland of Coleban with an ease that carried him out of their hands, but as he went, he realized the very uncomfortable but obvious truth: someone was after him.

He was Target For Tonight.

When he was again free of pursuit, he paused to think. What they wanted of him he could not imagine, but the fact remained. It occurred to him that he could not appeal to Authority, since Authority in the uniform of the Peacekeepers seemed to be an active part of this ploy. His nature was to rail against them, to label the operation a senseless, stupid plot. But a glimmering of reason entered, at least long enough to let him understand that a large organization does not play senseless, stupid games. They had something to gain, else they would not play.

It came as a blow to him to realize that he could not in confidence call upon the protection of the Peacekeepers of Xanabar. It cut fifty per cent of his future; he had left only the process of continuing on and on and on through this wilderness of broken window and rotten timber and decayed brick until he reached the spaceport that lies some Terrestrial kilometers beyond the outskirts of the city.

He found a sidewalk stair with an under-part ungraciously upholstered with ragged mattress and tattered blanket. Their dirt was offensive; but with the natural philosophy that the altitude of fastidiousness depends inversely upon the need, Terry Lincoln hit the very smelly hay.

His occupancy of a favorite assignation spot for the local juveniles of slumland Coleban was not as disliked as it might have been. Most of the would-be users had been homeless themselves and sympathized with the unknown who slept where they would lie. They found other accommodations and felt superior because they, now, were better off than he.

Young Lincoln awoke with the coming of true light; that is, shortly after dawn. Strangely, the fact of his plight was secondary to a long-established ritual now unavailable.

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First, of course, was the absence of clean clothing, to say nothing of the absence of clean underclothing. Further, he'd slept in his clothing, and this made them even more odious. He could have cheerfully skipped the morning bath at home or at school, especially when something interesting was up, but now that he was absolutely denied any opportunity to bathe, his body felt dusty, his skin crawled with imagined vermin and he was certain that he reeked of unwashed human flesh and stale perspiration. Second — but this quickly forged ahead and became foremost — his tongue and teeth felt furry and coated. Deep inside, Terry felt a vague unease; he knew academically that his teeth would hardly fall out after missing one brushing, but his training refuted the facts. So at this part of his awakening, Terry would have accepted the ration of water to brush his teeth instead of washing his body. . . .

Then came thirst. And the ration of water would have been poured down his gullet. For he had traveled far, through dusty city streets; and he had slept in quite unpleasant quarters in an atmosphere that reeked of rot and filth and decay.

Finally, he was hungry. He'd missed dinner the night before; and whereas he'd have been happy to forego dinner to partake of something interesting, the fact that he was denied made his hunger grow as he thought about the prospects. He could have missed a meal or several without any adverse effect other than the psychology involved in being denied.

With but minor complaint he endured the discomfort of not having a comb. The lack of a urinal bothered him only long enough to espy a drain-grille in the concrete flooring of his below-stairs hideaway and long enough to make sure no one was about to catch him in the act.

And then came the realization that hungry or no, bath or not, he had distance to cover. He realized then, for the first time in his life, that he was surely on his own, and that he would most likely be on his own until he, himself, managed to make his way from where he was to where he wanted to be. That the comforts of life were his to attain — once he gained them.

He had one advantage over his operation of yesterday. Today, having slept in his clothing and having been denied his morning ablutions, Terry Lincoln looked more like a youth of tenement slumland.

With no backward glance, Terry left his hideaway and with a wary eye peeled to catch the gaudy uniform of the Peace-

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keeper of Xanabar he began once more to make his way through squalor and filth toward the spaceport. He aimed as he believed to be right, and his aim was good, for he was on the same course as he'd been the night before.

But Martell and Homburg had turned him about neatly. They watched as reports came in, and as their clerks posted colored pinpoints on the illuminated maps and added lengths of illuminated line to mark Terry's course.

With deep interest — separated by the protocol into their own offices — Martell and Homburg watched the progress of the Terrestrial dog Beauregarde, as he followed the trail. That the dog's highly trained nose could separate the scent of a fellow Terrestrial was highly improbable. They laid this feat to a superior form of Understanding; an affinity toward a fellow Terrestrial that might well fail if Beauregarde were asked to track say, a Crespian.

V

The first missed meal — like the first hundred years — is the hardest. If missing a meal sharpens the wits, it is the wit to petty larceny that is sharpened, for the hungry conscience finds little to reproach for a swiped breakfast.

Two things worked in Lincoln's favor. First, he was in a district where the food merchants expected to lose a fair slice of his wares — and hoped sincerely that those who stole were truly in need. And second, his fumbling, inept attempts at comestible kleptomania were happily covered over by an outburst of customer indignation over some overcharge or underservice or soft spots in the hard cheese. With clerk, manager and customer in a full-throated round of hand-waving billingsgate and threats to call upon the Peacekeepers from either side of the mangle, Terry Lincoln found it easy to grab a hand full of fruit, some slices of cheese, and a few other odds and ends that were taken simply because they were available.

It was hardly a balanced diet, but Terry was a fifteen-year-old human and, as Humanity knows from the Galactic Center to the oscillating clusters, this has the appetite of a bottomless pit, the metabolism of a blast furnace.

And so he staved off starvation — and fairly well, for the lack of the formal breakfast still remained in his mind, while at the same time he was running a continuous snack-theft as the opportunity came.

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Twenty miles a day is a fair trek for the seasoned traveller through wilderness. Lincoln hardly had to hack his way through jungle with a machete, but the pitfalls of running afoul took their own toll. For example, he knew that breaking out into a dead run would bring trouble. And so by nightfall on the second eve, Lincoln was still making his way in the wrong direction.

By nightfall, Terry had passed beyond the ring of filth and squalor that was characteristic of the blight area. His surroundings were now quieter, sedate, with a nostalgic touch of days that had been, but now long gone, glory. It was an area in its dotage, remembering the past alone for it had no future but to fall into the widening circle of blight. Its present was no more than the dull state of transition from an active and fruitful past to a deadly sordid loss of all value.

Finding a place to sleep was a problem here. This was no neighborhood where gangs of delinquents roamed to meet and choose up sides to find their pleasure where it was to be found. The neighborhood was old, but it was clean, and it looked clean and it smelled clean. Just as there was no trash in the gutter, there was no crypt below the stairs, upholstered with cast off blanket and mattress.

The lack of a ready-made pad did not bother Terry as much as it might have. He did not, of course, analyze his feelings about the matter. But the behaviorist would have used the situation to demonstrate the value of experience. Last night, in sheer fatigue, Terry had found lodging when he needed it. Call it, if you must, luck. Today, he had survived an hostile environment; he had eaten and he had maintained his freedom and, although his sense of direction was wrong, he felt that he had made progress.

Terry Lincoln, for the first time tossed out on his own, had passed his first twenty-four hours in the jungle. And it has been said that a human, physically weak compared to his animal contemporaries and poorly endowed with tooth, nail, claw and grown-on fur coat, can be dropped anywhere that life exists and emerge as Master so long as he can survive the first diurnal period.

Terry had never heard this statement. But in his mind tomorrow was a new day, and since he'd survived this one, he would survive tomorrow.

The hours of the night passed along, and with them went some of Terry's self-confidence. Again, without his realizing it, he was

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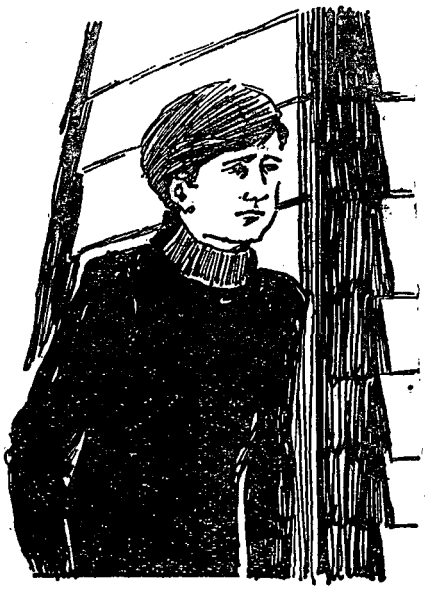
almost desperate; he was forced to take his chance with what was available. He had no choice. He was forced by his circumstance to make do.

Making do was chancy. Without a ready-made, under-the-stairs assignation-pad to preempt throughout the entire district, Terry was forced to seek an alternative. There were many, none of them truly safe. The district was old in the years of the city; it sported the houses of elder grandeur now on their way to seed or to be broken into half-sized rooms for mass dwelling. These relics of olden graciousness were equipped with the wide verandah, with the broad swing, the chaise,



glider, patio lounge or sofa provided for the afternoon or evening relaxation.

It was a vagrant's choice. Terry could either go on, on, on and on until he dropped, or he could take the chance of being found by a late homecomer or an early riser. The world was still not his to run.

So that night he slept on a chaise that was at least a generation older than he. But it was comfortable and clean.

Terry's awakening was not at the hands of an irate householder, but of his own. As dawn grayed the sky, his internal alarm clock, set early to avoid the early morning discovery, ran fast through subconscious anxiety. It rang long before there was any real danger of being discovered by the normal citizen of the area.

He had been discovered by another. On the floor beside the chaise lay Beauregarde.

Beauregarde was a tired dog. He had been at his tracking without sleep since Peter Hawley had shouted the order to find Terry, bring the kid to Understanding and return him whole. Beauregarde was a loyal dog, and his master's order was dog's law. Then, having trailed the youth to this pad, Beauregarde used sensible logic to conclude that part two of the order could wait

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until both of them were awake. Having found Terry, Beauregarde took time for sleep; it had been a long day for him too.

But as young Lincoln began to stir, Beauregarde came wide awake. He yawned with a splendid display of dog teeth, stretched fore and hind quarters, passed a forepaw over his nose and sat on his haunches, looking at Terry Lincoln. In fair imitation of Peter Hawley's frequent sally when finding one of Earth's misplaced, he asked, "Terence Lincoln, I presume?"

Terry recognized Beauregarde for what he was: Terrestrial dog, and undoubtedly here on Coleban as part of the Terrestrial Office. His own name, in the dog's modulated whine and controlled growl, was quite recognizable to the youth, but the rest was wholly lost even though the dog used a Terrestrial dialect quite close to Lincoln's own.

It was, of course, one thing to know that such as the intelligent dog existed and that intelligent dog was a great help to his master. It was something again to meet one face to face. A bit puzzled how to begin, Terry nodded and said, "I'm Terry Lincoln, and somehow I'm lost."

The dog waved his plume and replied, "I am Beauregarde. I belong to Peter Hawley, the chief troublemaker in Coleban."

"Beauregarde — Peter Hawley — the what — ?"

"Sorry. You have not Understanding," said Beauregarde, speaking as slowly and as clearly as he could. "I am Beauregarde. Peter Hawley is my master. Peter Hawley is the Terrestrial agent here in Coleban. We work together. I — er — let's get out of here!"

The simple phrases got through, and the urgency of the last one was quite clear. Without asking why, Terry followed the dog out of the place onto the sidewalk; he found out why a moment later when a man appeared on the spot they'd left.

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"How did you know"? asked Terry.

"Scent," said the dog. "He smelled of trouble."

"I didn't hear you . . . ."

"I — smelled — him — coming," said Beauregarde, as slowly and as clearly as he could. To add communication, the dog lifted his nose high and sniffed audibly. The communication of sound and pantomime got through to Terry, who nodded.

It became evident to Terry that theirs was a one-way communication link. The dog had Understanding. He had not. Therefore the dog could understand him, but he could not completely understand the dog. Since the dog could understand him, he said, "Let's go."

They reached the corner, and Terry turned to continue in the direction he thought to be toward the spaceport. "It can't be far," he said.

"What — can't — be — far?"

"The spaceport."

"It's on the other side of Coleban," said Beauregarde.

"Er — huh, please?"

"Sorry. Spaceport — is — on — other side of city."

"But it should be right out here — ?"

"No. You — got turned — around."

"Okay," said Terry resolutely. "Let's go."

He about faced and began to walk toward the center of Coleban. The dog puzzled for a moment and then said, "Stop!"

Terry stopped, puzzlement in his face. "Look, Beauregarde, I want to get back to the spaceport."

"Right — smack — through Coleban?"

"Why not?"

"Won't make it."

"Why not?"

"Coleban — won't let you. Us."

Beauregarde sat on his haunches. Like his master, he was big for action and little for the pussyfoot operation. Diplomacy was the show of fang and the sound of the deep-throated snarl and the canine willingness to tackle anything organic enough to bleed when bitten. Dimly to the dog's ability to think in terms of intrigue came the hard-to-follow logic that the Peacekeepers of Xanabar had some unknown reason for herding the kid out of town and isolating him. Certainly the youth's present freedom did not represent the inability of a planetful of trained operators to put the arm on an outlander who lacked Understanding.

With little hope of reaching the meaning or the reason, Beauregarde came to the conclusion that they were fairly safe from the clutches of the Peacekeepers

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so long as they did not attempt to beat their way through the city to the spaceport.

With extreme patience, the dog said, "Terry, try to understand me. We must make our way to the spaceport by the roundabout way."

"But can't you help me?"

"I can help," said Beauregarde quite clearly. "I can see that you are not molested nor harmed. I can not slip you into an inside pocket and smuggle you through the lines of the ungodly."

"I don't understand."

Beauregarde took in a deep breath and let it out in a dog-sigh. "That's the problem," he said. "You haven't yet got Understanding. If you had, this would make sense to you — probably more sense than it does to me."

Of this, Terry grasped little more than the obvious statement that he lacked Understanding.

"Well," said Beauregarde, eyeing the youth, "Peter said that I'd have to bring you to Understanding before we would beat our way through this mess."

"Understanding?" asked Terry.

"You — need — Understanding."

"And you can bring it to me?"

"No — . I can not. But I — can — bring you to Understand."

The difference was lost on Terry. He had never heard of either Mahomet or the Mountain, and so whither went thither was neither an issue nor a puzzlement. It simply did not exist.

To Terry, the acquisition of Understanding was to follow something like a comprehensive final test, or passing a stipulated age . . . or something he did not understand. It was, in fact, the last. It is impossible to explain Understanding to he who has it not and quite unnecessary to mention it to he who has it.

"Look," said Terry, "Why don't we barge in and throw our weight around?"

Beauregarde looked at Terry. The kid was speaking the language known best to both Beauregarde and Peter Hawley, but the process of tying into a platoon of the Peacekeepers required more than Understanding. It required a lot of practice and well integrated teamwork. It also required the like of Peter Hawley to quarterback the operation, for Peter had the timing, the play, the gimmick and the right tone of voice to cut this kind of mustard.

Without Understanding, Terry was not going to be of any help. With it, Terry and Beauregarde could communicate; and although there could be but one Peter Hawley in Beauregarde's life and admiration, Terry with

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Understanding could be a big help to Beauregarde and his grasp of the way Peter Hawley might have operated in the same circumstance.

The dog faced Terry and said, "I can — help you. But you — will find me — a responsibility. First — I must be fed."

This Terry managed to follow. The concept of a predatory carnivore taking his food where he caught it was for the dictionary, the encyclopedia and the course in paleontology and primitive life that he might be forced to take at Scholar's Cluster next semester. Domestic animals were fed.

He said, "If you're hungry, we'll have to steal food, you know."

"Yes," said Beauregarde. "But how?"

"Yes — but — what?"

"How — are we — going to steal — this food?"

Terry Lincoln looked at Beauregarde. He saw a short-haired animal of about eighty-odd pounds in his own estimation, standing a bit more than a half-meter at the shoulder. One thing occurred to him: This Terrestrial dog was harder and faster than he, so the fast footwork belonged to the dog. So he said, "I'll make some sort of a fuss, and while they are looking at me, you grab something to eat."

"Good boy," said Beauregarde.

VI

They approached the market from opposite sides. The boy was inconspicuous except for his disheveled appearance, which was out of place in this district. The dog was as conspicuous as a billboard, for Xanabar had no such four-footed animal, but Beauregarde kept his identity concealed by animal tactics until the action began.

The operation backfired.

The unkempt youth was obviously one of Xanabar's great underprivileged. His actions also indicated that he was not quite bright. So if this benighted youth was forced to steal his food, common decency required that he be fed, and neither merchant nor customer felt moved to raise an outcry. Instead, they treated Terry's fumbling attempts at shoplifting to the backside observation. Those who could not turn their backs managed, somehow, to be looking over there, or up here, or down there; anywhere but at the youth who hoped to create a stir.

However, the stir was created by Beauregarde.

The dog was by no means unknown to the people of Coleban although less than one out of a thousand had ever seen him in the flesh. The only dog in this part of the Galaxy, Beauregarde

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had appeared in picture and video as a member of the Terrestrial Office.

But as Terry had realized, knowing that such a thing as Terrestrial dog existed and meeting the animal were two different items on the agenda.

Beauregarde swooped in with his headlong gallop, hindpaws scissoring in front of the forepaws for the spring, then the stretch for distance. It was a magnificent sight, a spectacle of animal in full flight. Unfortunately for any plan made by Terry Lincoln, the citizens of Coleban bent their attention to the dog. There were "oohs!" and "ahs!" as the dog went racing through, but not one of them moved aside or made the expected opening.

Beauregarde was barricaded from the counter by spectators.

It remained to Terry Lincoln to remember what they were there for. Since things had gone in reverse — including the eyes of the onlookers, Terry found it easy to latch onto a fair grab of edibles.

And he remembered. Beauregarde was the hungry one. So Terry loaded up on stuff that looked as though it would satisfy the dog's appetite.

"A fine haul," said Beauregarde, "but did you remember to snatch a can opener as well?"

The words were lost on Terry, but the facts were quite plain. Much of the fodder Terry had grabbed was brilliantly labeled in seven-color stereograms that made the mouth water. These tidbits were encased in a container carefully designed to withstand any invasionary force that was not equipped with the special device furnished by the company that sold the food. Animal tooth and nail were ineffective; and whereas a mechanic might breach one of the containers, Terry was totally without tools.

So Terry shared his own food with the dog, mentally kicking himself for being so thoughtless.

Beauregarde, on the other hand, let Terry divide his food. Beauregarde was quite capable of foraging for his own, and he was far from lazy, but the main task was to bring the youth to Understanding, and this was one way to do it.

With this simple act, their roles reversed — or more properly, were rightfully established.

Terry saw in Beauregarde an end to his problem of being lost, strayed or stolen. Indeed, he might have remained so, ultimately gaining Understanding in the gutters of Coleban as many the Xanabarian youth did. But with the arrival of Beauregarde, he was no longer alone. He was

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part of a "they" relationship or companionship.

But if Terry expected Beauregarde to lead him through Coleban, either boldly through the serried lines of the Peacekeepers or stealthily through the shadows of night, he was mistaken.

Beauregarde was not a ministering angel. Beauregarde was a weapon; a trained dog of war. When he walked the streets of Coleban or any other city in the sprawling galactic empire of Xanabar, some feared him and some admired him; but all of them knew that this was dog, Terrestrial dog, intelligent Terrestrial dog. And any person who travelled with Terrestrial dog was himself a Terrestrial, of Earth, Sol III. And like any weapon, Beauregarde served two purposes. Calm and unruffled, he was a potent force but not very useful in the unviolent run of life. Aroused, he was an unsheathed menace, and the sensible thing was to see that Beauregarde was not angered, that his master was not angered. For it was well known that Terrestrial dog would not hesitate to charge into completely unreasonable odds at the order of his master.

As a travelling companion, Beauregarde was tops. But as an asset to Terry Lincoln's hope of being returned immediately to home and fireside, Beauregarde became a first-class responsibility.

Beauregarde could not manipulate the handle on a water-bubble. Beauregarde could not open doors. Beauregarde could not walk unnoticed along the sidewalks of Coleban, although Terry could so long as no one accosted him. Even before Beauregarde arrived, Terry had learned that the way to walk unnoticed through a city full of strangers is to walk quietly and utter not a sound. Open the yap and utter a word and all around you know you for what you are: An outlander.

The days passed. Beauregarde was not the total loss he said he would be; the dog knew his way around, and he had the dog's Understanding. Beauregarde also had a fine sense of direction, and he knew City Coleban. So Beauregarde did the navigating and Terry followed the dog's directions and suggestions. Slowly they were circling the central city making their way through the roughly annular transition area that sprawled between the blight that-was and the blight-to-be.

Their days and nights were copies of one another. They awoke in the morning and found water for drinking and a meager washing. They stole food in a process that became more and more refined as they gained prac

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tice. They walked, Terry openly along busy streets; Beauregarde racing through alleyways and gangways and backways so he would not call attention to the youth by his very presence.

Terry once suggested that they travel by night. At this, Beauregarde snowed the youth with a flurry of objections, none of which Terry could wholly understand — other than the fundamental concept that they were objections complete with valid argument to support them. The basic idea, Terry managed to grasp, was that he could easily mingle with the people of Coleban by day, whereas by night there would always be the unexpected watcher who would find it interesting for fair or foul reasons to note that a youth alone was walking through the neighborhood in the middle of the night.

So they traveled by day, with Terry walking from checkpoint to checkpoint located by Beauregarde, who operated as a scout.

Their progress was marked in fine detail by pinpoint lights and glowing stripline on the huge illuminated map of City Coleban. Their progress would have gratified Peter Hawley, but it was far from satisfactory to the watchers of City Coleban.

"When will the youth gain Understanding?" groaned Homburg.

"They seem to have worked out a routine that makes it unnecessary," said Martell. "Not even Doktur gave a thought to the possibility that Beauregarde, the dog, could lead young Terence Lincoln through the streets of City Coleban without first bringing the youth to Understanding."

"May I offer a suggestion, Zer Martell?"

"A solution?"

"No, zer. Just a possible explanation."

"Go ahead, Bod Homburg."

"Zer, possibly the dog, Beauregarde, is too capable for our purpose. He does not need a youth with Understanding to act for him."

"An acceptable explanation," nodded Martell. "No doubt a lesser dog might have turned the trick. But — " and Martell twisted his face in a sour smile — "Beauregarde is the only dog in all of Xanabar." He thought deeply for a full minute. Finally he took a deep breath and said, "Bod Homburg, their way must be made more difficult. You know what to do."

"I do indeed, Zer Martell."

VII

Morning came as usual, and Beauregarde and Terry came awake shortly after dawn.

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They drank at a bubbly fountain, and washed in the water of a small lagoon in a tiny park that still retained some of the long-gone elegance of the day when this district was strictly for the ruling class of Coleban.

The pair killed time until the customary store-opening hour by sauntering through the merchandising district and casing the stores and supermarkets for a likely source of food.

When the stores began to fill with customers, they made their usual play. It was, by now, a well rehearsed program. They entered from opposite sides, and as usual the very presence of Beauregarde created excitement. Some of the citizens were petrified with fright at the proximity of the animal, others were fascinated, still others wanted to move in close so they could tell their friends about the incident. With all attention distracted, Terry made his haul from the open shelves —

Or rather, he began to.

He was in the midst of filling a small sack with choice groceries when one of Xanabar's Peacekeepers in the full glittering regalia appeared behind him and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. Terry whirled, twisting his shoulder out of the Peacekeeper's grip by ducking his head under the Peacekeeper's arm and plunging away at an angle.

"Halt! Halt in the name of Xanabar!" To back up his order, the Peacekeeper's hand slid toward the stunner in its holster.

And at the same moment, Beauregarde came around the corner of the counter on a dead run. The dog slid to a crouching stop beside the Peacekeeper and emitted an ugly-sounding snarl. "Stop right there, Peacekeeper," growled the dog. "Draw that thing and you'll lose your hand at the wrist."

Terry stopped at the sound of Beauregarde's first deep-throated snarl; he turned to face them. The Peacekeeper whirled to face the dog. "You are the Terrestrial dog, Beauregarde."

"You are so right. I am."

"You may not threaten the peace of Xanabar."

"If you were capable of keeping it, which both I and my master doubt — or willing to try, which we question — neither I nor my master would be required in Xanabar."

"You may not criticize —"

"Stop it, Peacekeeper," said the dog. "The very fact that I am here is proof enough that someone in your upper office is playing games. Otherwise young Terence Lincoln would have been found and returned to the spaceport instead of being harried and chased and herded from one slum to another and forced to steal."

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"There are no slums in Xanabar."

"Call them 'Points of historic interest,' then," said Beauregarde.

"This is the missing Terrestrial youth, Terence Lincoln?"

"You call it 'Missing,' but we call it something else."

"This is the missing person. He is also a thief. He must answer to the Justice of Xanabar."

"That's what you think," said Beauregarde with a snarl. "Terry has had enough of the so-called Justice of Xanabar to last him a lifetime. Now if your justice were real and honest, you would escort us to the spaceport and make certain that this youth is properly restored to those who will see him home to Mother Earth."

"You cannot conceal his thieving under a cloak of false righteousness! Nor may you impute that Xanabar renders false justice when we take a thief to jail instead of releasing him to fly free and clear. He must answer to — "

"Oh, knock it off," snapped Beauregarde. "Terry and I will go out of here in one piece and on our feet, whether you live to tell your family about it or not. Now stand aside and don't put a hand on that stunner — or we'll find out how fast we are, you and I."

"You cannot threaten — "

"I already have. Now, if you want to try your skill against my speed, start reaching. Go ahead, draw it. Start now. I'll have plenty of time to take you after you start. Make your play first — "

"Look out!" shouted Terry. With a single, whirling motion, the youth turned, scooped up a container of something handy in size and shape and hardness, and hurled it in a bullet-throw over the dog's back into the face of what looked like an ordinary citizen of City Coleban.

But the ordinary citizen was far from ordinary, for truly ordinary citizens do not carry minibeams in the breast pocket ordinarily reserved for pens and pencils.

The hard canister caught the citizen across the bridge of the nose. The rim bit deep as bone splintered. No will of iron was ever strong enough to prevent the reaction; pain and shock removed all plan for action from the man's mind. By reaction, his hand opened and let the minibeam drop as he raised the hand to his face in the instinctive gesture.

Beauregarde leaped, caught the falling minibeam in his mouth, and with a sharp snap of his powerful neck, he hurled it against the face of the counter beside him. It hit and smashed with an ear-splitting *crack!* and a blinding flash of light as its bottled power went radiant.

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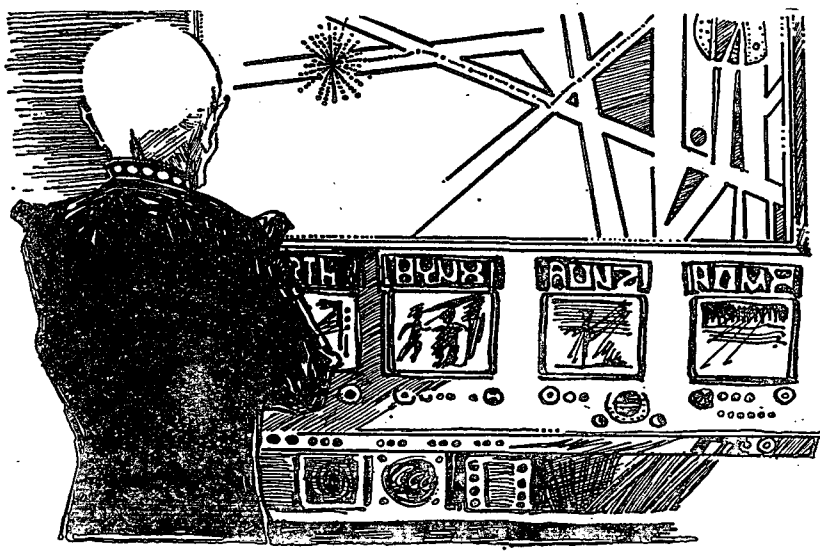

In the excitement, the Peacekeeper managed to draw his stunner and was bringing it to bear on Beauregarde.

"Hit him low!" barked the dog as he leaped for the Peacekeeper's throat.

Terry plunged forward in a football tackle, hitting the Peacekeeper several inches lower than any referee would have allowed. But this was no game and neither was it time to behave like a gentleman.

The Peacekeeper went over in a tangle, his legs cut out from under him by the flying tackle, and his topside completely overwhelmed by the mass of the dog, who hit him at the throat. There was little bloodshed. Beauregarde merely nicked the soft flesh, but he kept that throat between his fangs until the Peacekeeper had time to realize just what the dog could have done.

Then with a gesture calculated to live in the humility of the Peacekeeper for the rest of his life, Beauregarde slurped the man from the chin to hairline with a large, soggy, rough-surfaced tongue-of-dog. "Your're dead," he said. "Lie down and be counted."

Then the dog looked at Terry. "I think we've stirred us up a Donnybrook in the good old Peter Hawley tradition," he said. "Let's cut out and slope for home."

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Terry scrambled to his feet, pocketing the Peacekeeper's stunner because it seemed like a good idea at the time. He looked around at the people of Coleban; some were frozen, some were leaving and a fair number were converging warily. "Beau," he replied, "I read you a solid five by five."

Side by side, the Terrestrial youth and his dog headed for the nearest door. The crowd melted before them, opening a way; those who were the professionals in this game beat a parallel course outside of the immediate crowd and began to converge on the door. Slowly; they would bring up behind and surround the pair with the aid of those outside.

A large figure loomed in the door, blocking it almost completely.

"Beau! It's old saffron-face. Hit 'im high; I owe him one!"

They hit old saffron-face one-and-two. Beauregarde caught the throat with the soft-trained mouth of a retriever, and the dog's mass bent old saffron-face backward, thrusting the barrel stomach forward on an arched spine. Terry connected with this massive facade in a shoulder block that caught the plexus and the pit of the stomach with a paralyzing blow.

Saffron-face did not go down. He went back and back and back, off-balance on the rounds of his stumbling heels, his trained body struggling to regain footing. The mass of his flesh, which he'd used as a barrier at the doorway, became the main point of a one-body flying wedge that battered its way backward through his own men and created an avenue through which Terry and Beauregarde went before the opening could close behind their human battering ram. At the curb, the stumbling heels found no means of support, and saffron-face went over on his back, walloping the back of his head on the pavement.

He was out stone cold in the gutter when Terry and Beauregarde used him as a gangplank toward freedom.

Once free of immediate hands, both of them turned left and ran along the center of the street. They outdistanced the local gathering with ease since the locals were still trying to figure out what had happened. By a zigzag course they managed to get themselves out of sight.

"And now which way?" asked the dog.

"The shortest and quickest," said Terry immediately.

"That may lead us through some trouble," said Beauregarde, after looking around to locate himself with respect to the rest of City Coleban.

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"That may be," replied Terry, "but there's two things wrong with trying to make it on the sly."

"Two?"

"Two. First, I've suspected all along that this was a planned operation. Now I know it is. So the sooner we can get out of it the better — it'll give us less time to get trapped. Two, the reason I know it is a planned operation is because I now know why they want me alive and with Understanding. You see, Beau, I am a courier."

"A courier?"

"Beau, I could hardly understand you before, even though you were speaking and thinking in my own native tongue. Now even this mess they gabble around here makes sense to me. I understand the tongue of Xanabar. Now, how could you send a secret message through enemy territory in a universe where Understanding is the way of life?"

Beauregarde said, "I wouldn't know. My world is not filled with intrigue and secret messages."

"Well, one of the first things about secret messages is to conceal the fact that a message is being sent. In this universe of Understanding, the only way is to send the message by some courier who does not yet have Understanding — neither he nor anyone he meets will be aware of the fact. Second, of course, no one could simply carry a letter. To carry the information, I was given posthypnotic orders to forget what I'd been told until I was back home on Earth. Unfortunately, I gained Understanding while here in Xanabar. And if they get their clutches on me, they can extract the information because, with Understanding, I can call up information from my subconscious."

"And you know what this message is?"

"Sure — and so does whoever runs the Peacekeepers of Xanabar. So it's no secret. Professor Marquart discovered the secret of Scholar's Cluster and planted it in my mind to carry back home."

"Whoof!" said Beauregarde. He looked up into the sky. "My eyes are not as sharp as my nose, and I can neither see nor smell a hovercar at twenty thousand feet. Terry, do you see anything up there?"

"Clouds. Oh, there's a flash, a speck. Can't make anything out."

"That will be an observer in a hovercar. Probably with a rifle-microphone that lets him listen to every word we say."

"So we cannot go by stealth," said Terry. "Then we will go boldly and defy them to do their worst. Come on," he said, "which way toward the spaceport?"

Beauregarde pointed, then as Terry started walking in that di-

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rection with a determined stride, Beauregarde aligned himself at the lad's side.

VIII

Once more there came a change in the environment. A subtle change; not one of cracked windows, peeling paint, nor of lost elegance or a standard of living. It was a change in the traffic, both vehicle and human. It was not a change in the pattern, but in the density; as if some computer had extrapolated the natural city pattern of shaded randomness along an asymptote toward zero. It looked exactly like one of those periods in the life of any community in which, in certain hours, everyone in the area is busy inside.

And being so natural-looking, it went unnoticed by Terry and Beauregarde.

The total area was roughly elliptical, with the major axis aligned with their general course. Being further geometric, Terry and Beauregarde were approximately at one focal point of the ellipse, the behind point, so that the other focus was always ahead of them. As they walked toward the spaceport — still far across the city — the citizens of Xanabar were being ordered aside and away, to clear the area; they remained aside and out of sight until the Terrestrial pair passed, and were then permitted to resume their daily lives.

It was an operation that could only have been carried out with the resources of a large, despotic organization that was driven by the prospect of great gain or loss.

From the site, the operation was not possible to grasp, but it was clearly visible to Martell and Homburg.

These Xanabarians had abandoned their offices and the huge illuminated map for cramped quarters in a huge tractor-trailer van, fitted inside as temporary field offices. In place of the city-wide map was a sectional area to the same approximate scale and detail, showing the neighborhood. Tiny colored pointlets of light labeled and identified all vehicular and pedestrian traffic so that citizen could be told from Peacekeeper, with Terry and Beauregarde especially coded.

They were not alone, citizen, Peacekeeper and the two targets. Peter Hawley was present, too. Peter did not have the advantage of the high-flying hovercars, with their rifle microphones and the super televideo lenses, and the computer that maintained surveillance over the neighborhood by following the moving traffic and maintaining the code once the object was identified.

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But Peter Hawley was not without his own sources of information. Earth's recognition of the silliness of trying to operate under cover in a universe full of Understanding had another facet. By using Beauregarde, an object as conspicuous as a paid political advertisement, Peter could keep track of Terry with fair accuracy. For the passage of anything as exotic as Terrestrial dog through any district made various waves. Some were frightened, some curious; many had heard of this strange beast with the tongue of man. Speculation, fear, wonder, sometimes amusement and quite frequently fanciful tales of personal encounter were commonplace in the streets and in the vurguzz joints; all one had to do was listen carefully and then sort fact from fiction.

By keeping one ear to the ground, Peter Hawley had been able to keep track of Terry and the dog, and so long as progress was maintained, Peter let well enough alone.

Like Terry, Peter was at a total loss to figure out what Xanabar had in mind; certainly there was enough manpower to collect the kid if Xanabar wanted to and was willing to pay the price of overt kidnap. In the hope of gaining some idea of what was going on, Peter let things ride, while watching carefully.

When the call went out to execute one of their mobilization plans, its interception by the Terrestrial Office was a matter of standard operating procedure. Peter went to the periphery of the ellipse along with Martell, Homburg and their specialized force of Peacekeepers. Knowing the city well, Peter stationed himself fairly accurately on a nearline between Beauregarde's position and the spaceport. This left an error-probability of several city blocks, but it was close.

So in this area there were three very determined attitudes. One, a very large and determined group, was not going to let Terence Lincoln get to City Coleban spaceport; they were restrained only by the sure knowledge that open violence would bring about retaliation and they were wary of the fratchy temper of all Terrestrials. The second, a minority consisting solely of Peter Hawley, was bent upon joining forces with Terry and Beauregarde and marching out of the district with them, daring any Xanabarian to put one toe over the line demarking a forty-foot circle about them. The third consisted of Terry and Beauregarde, who wanted out and were going to get out, with or without help, with flags flying or furled, either marching down the avenue or slinking through the alleys.

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It was Terry, who noted the lightening traffic. Not as such, however, but in an entirely different way.

The sight of standard urban traffic is natural, as inconspicuous to the city man as Poe's *Purloined Letter* or the postman whose presence was so stereotyped and scheduled that he was above suspicion. But when traffic thins down, it is no longer the collective: City Traffic, but individuals and vehicles that are not a mass but a bunch of articles that neither look nor act alike.

Put another way, *Traffic* is a moving mass; but *a Vehicle* is a means of transportation.

"Beau," said Terry. "Why must we walk?"

"I don't see any visible means of riding," said the dog. "Why, there aren't any cars parked along here. And if we did try to swipe one, could you drive it?"

"Not really, and this is hardly the time to start learning, even though the principle must be about the same as any vehicle. You know, a dingus to start it, a doodad to make it go fast or slow, wheel or lever to steer and some sort of brakes. Finding out which is which can be hazardous if done empirically. No. Beauregarde, I was wondering whether we might convince some driver that it would be the friendly thing to drive us."

"I see," said the dog. "You mean, 'To the spaceport, James, or kiss your arm good-by.'?"

"Something like that."

"Might be interesting, at that," said Beauregarde, looking up and down the street carefully. "And now that you mention it, traffic is sure thin. Terry, I'll bet you a nice juicy steakbone that any driver we stop will be Peacekeeper in mufti. This is the kind of caper they plan."

"Well, you've taken on a Peacekeeper or two, haven't you?"

"Sure thing. Peter and I have taken on quite a number. But never more than one or two at a time."

"Then one more won't bother you."

"Not really — but this time we'll be taking on the entire force, Terry."

"The entire force is what they've got surrounding us," said Terry thoughtfully. "And we're going to be collected at their option — unless we bust out shouting."

"I hear you," said Beauregarde. "But what do you propose to do about it?"

"We wait until we and a vehicle approach a traffic signal simultaneously; specifically, a vehicle with a single occupant, the driver. And one with doors easy to open."

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They continued toward the next intersection, paying little apparent attention to their surroundings, but watching carefully in any windows to see if there was a vehicle approaching Far behind, one turned into the street and began to approach them.

Terry chuckled. "Now I know why the old folks kept saying that they simply can't explain Understanding to someone who doesn't have it and didn't have to to someone who has. It's sort of like playing chess with every move and motive explained."

Beauregarde said, "Peter always claims that Understanding is a sort of refined premonition or intuition; that women and dogs always had it even before it was discovered."

"Beau, when was Understanding discovered?"

"All interstellar travelling cultures have it," said Beauregarde. "It seems to enter any culture that is on the verge of real space travel. I guess, about that time, most people in the culture are well warned and prepared to believe that Out There they will meet creatures of extreme ugliness whose ancestors were out spacing while the home race was still settling their differences with a stone hatchet."

"I mean in the individual."

"Same difference but less vast. It comes rapidly once the individual really matures enough to take on true responsibility, face the consequences of his own acts, and above all, to take care of those who depend upon him. Now, of course, there always have been individuals like that, many of them. But Understanding has to wait until the culture is ready for it. Until then, it lies a dormant faculty that all passes to some degree, but — er, let's put it this way, Terry: until the culture and its people are advanced enough to grasp Understanding, it itself can only be latent. And — er, here comes our transportation, right on time and to your specifications. Ready?"

"Sure thing."

"Let's go and find out who can maneuver the faster."

IX

The car stopped and paused overlong. Terry opened a rear door, and Beauregarde leaped in, over the back of the front seat, and showed the driver his fangs. Terry got in behind and closed the door.

"Peacekeeper," said Beauregarde, "this may be an act to you, but we're deadly serious. Got it?"

The driver hit the go pedal, and the car leaped forward; within five seconds it was going fifty

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miles per hour. "Bite me at this speed," said the driver, "and none of us will walk home."

"You haven't won yet," snarled Beauregarde. "You'll have to slow down sooner or later, and then you lose — unless you're driving us toward the spaceport."

"Watch me," said the driver. He goosed the pedal until the car was making better than sixty-five. Then he relaxed behind the wheel.

Neither Terry nor Beauregarde had ever envisioned a situation like this, but both of them understood what was going on. Obviously, the driver was following a carefully outlined route, from which all traffic had been cleared so that such breakneck speed was quite safe. It went quietly, there was no blare of the horn at intersections. And to point up the magnitude of the forces that Terry and Beauregarde were facing, traffic signals always turned to favor the hurtling vehicle even though there was no side traffic visible at any intersection.

"This always proves what Peter says," said Beauregarde. "If you want to ride at a break-law speed, ride with a Keeper Of The Peace, who is sworn to defend and uphold the law. It's fun going this fast, isn't it?"

"So far. But when he stops?"

"We'll see. Surely," said Beauregarde to the driver, "you don't think that stopping before fifty thousand witnesses is going to stop me from making a mess of you."

"Not really. It's one of the hazards of the profession," said the driver.

With great skill, the driver hit a turn, tapped the brakes until the car drifted, waited through the drift until the car was aligned with the new street, and then kicked the drive again. The turn took no more than a second or two, and the force of the turn made them all hang tightly — too tightly to bother watching their surroundings.

When stress and strain diminished it was too late; dead ahead and blocking their path was a huge van. To Terry it was a sure crash, and coming too suddenly to do more than realize that a sure crash was coming. To Beauregarde it was part of the caper but this time was far too short to do more than appreciate the fact. To the driver it was part of his instruction and training, for instead of hitting the brakes in a panic stop, he hit the go-pedal and clenched the wheel carefully.

The back of the van dropped, making a ramp. The car hit the ramp and raced up with hardly a bounce on its special springs. Inside the van was a solid mass of feathery plastic that cushioned

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the possible crash; a carefully designed mass of plastic that applied braking force inversely proportional to the kinetic energy of the racing car.

The car came to a stop with all three occupants pasted to the front by the force of deceleration, but unharmed beyond a few bruises and the inevitable blackout that comes with the high-G forces.

When the smoke cleared away, Beauregarde was in a small cage, Terry was manacled lightly to a chair, and their driver was receiving the thanks of a man behind a small but ornate desk.

Beauregarde said, "That was a fine operation — but then, it would be, wouldn't it, Commissioner Martell?"

"You know him?" asked Terry.

"Sure. Peter and I have met him a number of times but under different circumstances. This is Commissioner Martell, Number Two Peacekeeper. The party sitting at the other desk is Homburg, Number Three or among the several Number Threes that Martell has reporting to him."

"Quite," said Martell to the dog. To Terry he said, "You are Terence Lincoln, of Earth."

"I am — and now that you recognize me, I demand that you place me on a spacecraft bound for Earth."

"Stop acting childish," said Martell coldly. "You've gained Understanding. You are responsible for your acts. You are going to account for them."

"I am a Terrestrial — "

"You are a lawbreaker, and we are operating within the rules of Universal Law."

"If so, why this big operation?"

"Quite simple," said Martell calmly. "At first, we assumed that your runaway was only a boyish lark, the universal urge to go it alone in a strange land for a time. We tolerated your boyish pranks. We smiled at your theft of food, for it is neither the policy of Xanabar nor the desire of her citizens that the stranger within her gates go hungry."

"That was darned nice of you," said Terry.

"Then you team up with this animal, and at that point you became no longer a youth with an adventuresome spirit, but the center of possible danger to the Peace of Xanabar. At this point, the Peacekeepers we assigned to see that you came to no harm in the badlands of City Coleban were then assigned to protect the Peace. And then you gained Understanding, Terence Lincoln, and became responsible for your acts."

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"So I did. But there's an —"

"And, with Understanding, did you abandon your lawlessness? You did not. Instead, you assaulted a Peacekeeper —"

"Old saffron-face had it coming."

"— during the performance of his duty instead of appealing to him for protection and safe delivery to the spaceport. Had you renounced your former acts by becoming a peace-loving man, you would not be here."

"Nuts," replied Terry. "I know why I'm here and so does Beauregarde."

"Of course," said Martell smoothly. "Understanding works that way. You are a lawbreaker, and you are here to account for your petty felonies."

"Fine. And I suppose that I will be sentenced to a series of terms for vagrancy, theft, trespass and using old saffron-face for a punching bag? Terms long enough to squeeze the secret of Scholar's Cluster out of me."

"You have that secret?" asked Martell.

"Get off it," growled Terry. "You know it, and I know it, and Beauregarde knows it. Maybe even Peter Hawley knows it by now."

"Yes," smiled Martell suavely. "But you see, I know it now because you've told me."

"Terry," said Beauregarde, "you can't fight this city hallitician with words. You'll find that he and his gang of Peacekeepers were acting only in the best interests of Xanabar, and for both Earth and its hapless youth, Terence Lincoln. That he and his have put you through a wringer, and out of it comes a hidden secret — that's just serendipity, Terry."

"Well," replied Terry thoughtfully, "nothing we've done is a capital crime, so he'll have to release us sooner or later."

"I'd prefer it sooner," said Beauregarde. "This cage isn't big enough, and I'm not in favor of cages anyway. Peter —"

"You can forget Peter Hawley," said Martell. "The danger of you and the youth together was so great that we have cleared the entire district of anybody except we Peacekeepers, who have sworn to lay down our lives to maintain the Peace of Xanabar."

"And I suppose that stunt with the truck full of crushable gunch was simply part of the Peacekeeping activity?"

"How would you apprehend a headstrong youth and a dangerous animal who had just invaded the car of a citizen and threatened the citizen with the loss of life or limb? Would you hold up a hand and cry 'Stop!' or perhaps —"

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"Forget it," said Beauregarde. "You make me — "

There came a crash. The van lurched, humping high on one corner and then dropping down so that the corner was lower than the others. The sense of smooth motion stopped.

There was muffled shouting outside. The van lurched slowly again. Then came that incredibly short electrical tingle that fills the region when a nerve stunner is fired; the effect came through the metal walls of the van even though the bolt would not have penetrated.

The uproar outside ceased. The van door opened, an dtwo Peacekeepers came in carrying a man by ankles and armpits. The man was not as stiff as a board, because the old cliche implies something straight and flat. The man was stiff all right, but he had been frozen in the typical posture of a man halfway through the act of getting out of a car in a tearing hurry. The Peacekeepers dropped him on the floor, where he rolled over statuelike until three points of rest came to ground with the center of gravity between them.

"He came roaring down the street flat out," explained one Peacekeeper. "He didn't try to miss you. Instead, he aimed the car like a missile."

Martell nodded and waved the Peacekeeper away. "Now we are complete," he said cheerfully. "Terence Lincoln, may I present Peter Hawley — who won't be able to do anything for a day or so. Now," he said to the dog, "what were you thinking about Peter Hawley?"

"There isn't much to say," said Beauregarde. "You've got me caged, Terry manacled to that chair and Peter Hawley in the deep freeze. We can't even go where you'd like us to go — we'll have to be taken."

Martell turned to Homburg. "Whistle up your car. There'll be room in it for all of us, if we put Hawley and his dog in the trunk." He turned to Beauregarde. "And that makes three," he said, waving a hand at Peter. "Lawbreakers all; for we will find that his stated purpose was to come here to assist you criminals to escape. He is an accessory and thus accused of the same breaches of the Peace as you."

Beauregarde made an ugly dog-noise deep in his chest. Terry rattled the handcuffs helplessly. Peter Hawley startled everybody by emitting a long, lung-shuddering sigh and collapsing from his up-ended statue position to a completely flaccid limpless flat upon the slightly tilted floor.

"They must have hit him with a near-miss or a splash-off from

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the car body," said Martell. "He shouldn't go limp for at least another hour."

"No matter, Martell," said Homburg. "It will make him easier to put in my trunk."

"So it will, Homburg. So it will."

Inwardly, Homburg glowed. Martell had been addressed as an equal and had replied in kind. He had been accepted.

For one of five in the office van, things were looking up.

X

The man who entered wore the uniform of a Peacekeeper, complete with side-arm, but on his shoulder was the blazer of a chauffeur. He saluted Homburg and said, "Your car, Zer Homburg."

"You made good time," nodded Homburg. "Get help and put that one in the trunk. Then come and get that animal and put it with its master. In the trunk. We will be quite capable of handling the youth."

"Yes, Zer Homburg."

The chauffeur turned to walk toward Peter Hawley as Homburg approached Terry Lincoln. It was their first mistake.

Terry waited, looking helpless as Homburg approached, the ring of keys dangling from his hand. "Behave," he said to the youth, "and you won't get hurt." Seeing no move or even an air of defiance, Homburg put the key in the lock, turned, and sprang the cuff. Terry lurched backward in his chair, curled like a ball, put his feet up and let them fly outward. Homburg went hurtling back, the ring of keys completely torn from his grasp. He hit the dog's cage at the same time Terry's chair completed its backward overturn and hit the floor.

The blow took Terry's breath, but he was young and he had been hit before on the playing fields of Scholar's Cluster. He landed almost flat and rolled to one side, the keys still dangling from the lock.

Homburg's scream stopped all motion. He'd fallen with one arm close to the dog's cage. While Homburg's body was still a-tumble, Beauregarde had snapped at the fingers and caught. Now he had hand and arm through the bars; he had Homburg's wrist between the gleaming molars, with the fangs denting the skin on the far side of the wrist. As the echoing scream died, the dog applied pressure. Homburg screamed again.

Terry got to his feet slowly, watching the action — or the frozen lack of it — warily. "Beauregarde means 'stop!' or your man Homburg loses a hand," he said.

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They stood. Martell in half-a-step forward; the Peacekeeper half-turned from Peter Hawley, his hand on the side-arm; Homburg on the floor, groveling in fear and pain; and Beauregarde with a trickle of blood on his muzzle.

They stood frozen for but a moment, but it was moment enough for Terry to regain his breath and his balance. Then as he reached to unlock the other cuff, Martell went into sound and fury.

"Drill them both!" he shouted at the Peacekeeper and with the words he leaped for Terry. Terry swung the manacles; they were not the morgenstern of knightly warfare, but they were lethal against unarmored flesh. The open cuff caught Martell in the mouth and stopped him in midstep.

Behind the Peacekeeper, Peter Hawley fought himself to his knees, lunged with painful lack of nearly all coordination, and managed to connect — not with the Peacekeeper's shooting arm, but with his calves and ankles. The shock wrecked the Peacekeeper's aim; the bolt hit the metal wall and simply disappeared. Its field tingle went unnoticed.

Beauregarde snapped his head, and Homburg screamed once more and fainted. "Get me outa here!" roared the dog. Terry swung the manacles again, but Martell ducked back — and into the Peacekeeper, who was trying once more to take aim. They both went back a step, off balance; then the second step hit the still-trying Peter Hawley. Peacekeeper and Martell went down a-sprawl, landing on Peter, who did not feel a thing.

There were, by luck, only two keys on the dangling ring that still hung from the cuff. One was the key still in its lock. The other was the only one free. Without even looking, Terry lunged with the other key, slid it into the lock on the cage and turned. Beauregarde came out with a leap that brought him face to face with Martell — or more properly, fang to face with Martell. With a snarl, Beauregarde said, "I broke his wrist. What do you want to lose, Peacekeeper?"

Martell cringed back from the fangs, but replied, "You wouldn't dare —"

"Oh, I can bite gently," said the dog.

"You cannot win. We're surrounded by my men for an entire district of City Coleban."

"Then I suggest that you tell them that you are escorting Terence Lincoln to the spaceport, in person, with Beauregarde the dog and Peter Hawley the Terrestrial

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Agent as part of the embarking party."

Martell sneered. "Watch," he said. He stepped to the door of the van, ran down the window and shouted orders that the Terrestrials were to be given free passage.

Seconds later there was a muffled blast outside, and a black missile screeched in through the opened window and hit the far wall. Beauregarde leaped and caught it in mid-bounce, snapped his head aside without waiting to come to the floor and whipped the smoking missile through the opened window. It burst outside; some of the pale blue gas billowed in, but not enough to do its job. A second missile hit the side of the van. A third hit the window, cracking it, as Terry wound it up. A fourth hit the closed window but did not shatter the glass.

Calmly, Martell said, "I don't mind taking a gas nap. You can't stay in here forever, and when we awaken, we Peacekeepers will be once more the masters."

There was an official sounding rap on the door. "Open!" came the cry.

"Go ahead, Terry, open it."

"And let them in?"

"No, to let me out for a moment."

"I — er —"

"Open it, Terry," said the painful voice of Peter Hawley. "He — knows what — he's doing."

Terry opened the door. Beauregarde leaped out, catching the Peacekeeper outside by the throat and carrying him backwards by yards before the two of them went down. The man screamed in fear and pain, and Beauregarde cold-bloodedly raked the soft throat to make ugly furrows that ran together and down to a spreading red puddle on the pavement. Then with a leap the dog turned, made three long bounds and on the third passed back inside the van.

Terry slammed the door behind the dog; he was just in time to stop a spattering of missiles that further cracked the glass but did not breach it.

Beauregarde faced Martell; there was menace in the dog's forward pose and there was anger in the dog's voice.

"You, Martell, listen to me. We're safe in this bullet-proof, mobile castle of yours, but you're likely to win so long as you can keep us bottled up. But we're not staying. Peter is here —"

"I'm not much — like my fighting — self," groaned Peter Hawley.

"In fighting trim or barely able to sit up and take nourishment, you're good for this game."

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"Game? Oh, the one about the farmer with the fox, the goose and the sack of grain, and one wide river to cross in a leaky boat?"

"The same — with Terry as the prize. Now, Martell, hear this! I am a dog, and while I have Understanding, it is a dog's Understanding because, being a dog, I think like a dog. No civilized person commits murder, Martell. But isn't 'murder' confined to the killing of one's own species? I hardly think of it as 'murder' when Peter Hawley points at some ugly bastovich and says, 'Beauregarde, kill!' because the deceased isn't my kind of herring.

"Now," went on the dog, "that Peacekeeper out there on the street isn't dead, but he will bear the scars of dog-fangs for life and he will forevermore be scared of the sight of Terrestrial dog. You, Martell, think of him as an example and tell your mob of Peacekeeping warriors outside to think of their Glorious Leader, Commissioner Martell, lying out there for real with his throat slashed with sharp teeth — because that is the name of the game of the farmer with the fox and the goose and the grain."

"Threats cannot —"

"Get off it!" snapped the dog. "They can too. You will therefore give orders that Homburg's tame Peacekeeper is to drive through your battle line with Terrence Lincoln and your outfit remains honest. Once Terence is in the hands of the local Terrestrial Office at the spaceport, your Peacekeeper and Peter will return, at which point I will permit your man Homburg to depart as whole as he ever will be. It shouldn't be too bad," said Beauregarde with a cynical tone in his voice, "because a man in his position hardly needs a good, flexible, fast-drawing gun wrist. Once Homburg gets to a sawbones for his shattered wrist, and Peter gets a shot of perk-up to dissipate that nerve-stun hangover, he himself can return alone and we happy trio will walk out of here with you in the middle."

"You fools, you cannot —"

"But you forget. It's really *your* throat that *we* are wagering, isn't it — Bod Martell?"

— GEORGE O. SMITH

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A Galaxy of Fashion

o Previews of What the Well-Dressed Woman Will Wear . . . Next Century!

Text by FREDERIK POHL

Drawings by CAROL POHL

At the 1967 World Science Fiction Convention in New York we will sponsor our second annual *Galaxy of Fashion Show*. As a special service to those few of our readers who may not make this headline-making event we are bringing you a few sketches to show the sort of thing science-fiction writers, artists and fans think the next generation may put on . . . or, come to think of it, is it really the *next* generation that's being put on?

• Why buy a pair of boots? Why must both legs of a pair of slacks look the same — for that matter, why should both legs be slacks? Here's a conception of Dynamic Asymmetry (left), designed to drive a shoe manufacturer insane.

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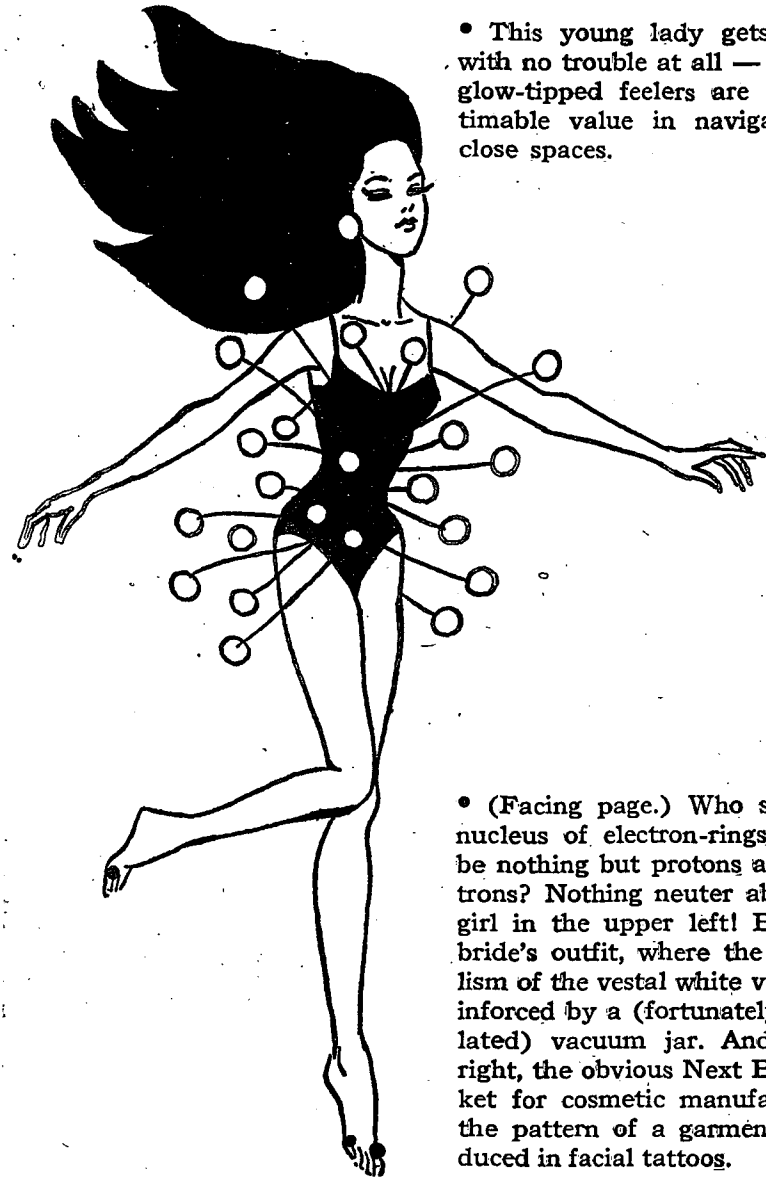

• This young lady gets lit up with no trouble at all — and the glow-tipped feelers are of inestimable value in navigating in close spaces.

• (Facing page.) Who says the nucleus of electron-rings has to be nothing but protons and neutrons? Nothing neuter about the girl in the upper left! Below, a bride's outfit, where the symbolism of the vestal white veil is reinforced by a (fortunately, simulated) vacuum jar. And at far right, the obvious Next Big Market for cosmetic manufacturers: the pattern of a garment reproduced in facial tattoos.

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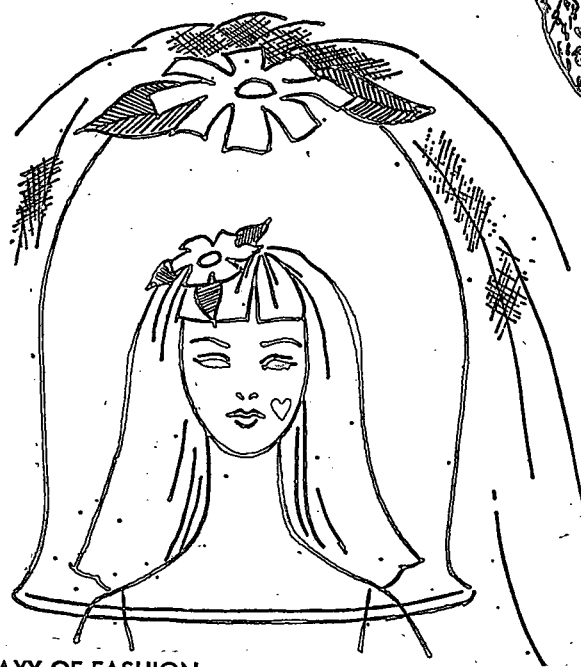

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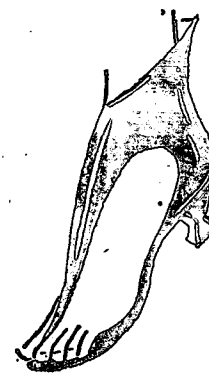
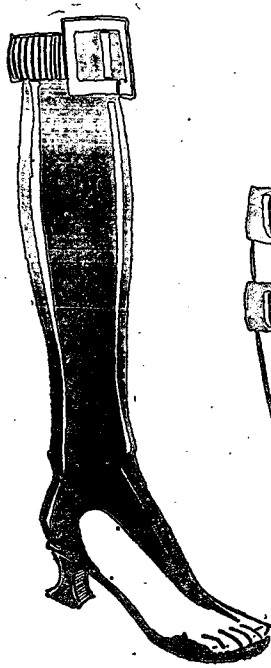
• Shoe styles for Milady, reading clockwise from top right: (A) Feet on the half-shell. (B) Japanese slippers with heels. (C) The Skiers' Delight: a high-fashion boot with built-in splint. (D) The best possible compromise for a Flower Child who goes steady with a Rocker.

(Facing page.) Our asymmetric girl again, with a hat that conceals telemetry, cosmetics, pills and possibly a complete change of clothes; and with her the Strip Suit, science fiction's answer to the bikini. One part of the costume is a two-inch-wide length of velvet. The other part is pure girl.





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Galaxy Bookshelf

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Damon Knight perpetrates the damnedest jokes on himself. Behold him: author, critic, *doyen* of the good, holy and true in science fiction, and editor of *Worlds to Come* (Harper and Row, $4.95). This is a collection of nine science-fiction adventures. The contributing authors are, in the order of the table of contents, Arthur C. Clarke, H. B. Fyfe, Ray Bradbury, Algis Budrys, Isaac Asimov, John D. MacDonald, Robert A. Heinlein, C. M. Kornbluth and James Blish.

This title is more than amply justified by Damon's introduction, which is an excellent essay on science fiction as prophecy. He begins: "Science fiction and prophecy are two different things." Exactly so. In his postwar eagerness to propagate science fiction through the general audience, John W. Campbell had fallen into the trap of claiming that only prophetic science fiction was science fiction at all. Fortunately, he asserted, there was a lot of it. And its literary merit was directly measurable in terms of its content of successful prophecy. In other words, when Holland invented the submarine, he transformed Jules Verne from a *flaneur* into a great writer.

Damon says, much more correctly, that today's generation of scientists contains a number of influential individuals who, as impressionable youngsters, were influenced by science fiction. And the science fiction of their adolescent days in turn embodied a great many subconscious desires of the people who grew up to be today's taxpayers. Thus, science fiction is in a sense a vehicle for self-fulfilling prophecy, since today's science is shaped by some ex-fans pursuing the research programs which the taxpayers

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will underwrite, as distinguished from the programs no one will give a plugged nickel for.

This oversimplifies the case, and certainly paraphrases the hell out of it, but it approximates the truth. This is essentially what Damon says, and this is approximately the real situation in (those few areas of) science (which I have observed closely).

That being so, we are now pressed for some means of understanding this book's inclusion of Bradbury's "Mars Is Heaven!", John D. MacDonald's "The Big Contest!" or "The Edge of the Sea", by Algis Budrys, or, for that matter — a matter to which we shall return shortly — Arthur C. Clarke's "The Sentinel". That is, if these are supposed to be examples of anything implied by the title of this anthology, or of any *sequitur* to Damon's essay.

There is no quarrel with the inclusion of H. B. Fyfe's "Moonwalk", or Robert Heinlein's "Ordeal In Space", Kornbluth's "That Share of Glory", Blish's "Sunken Universe" or Asimov's "The Martian Way". These stories all say that man not only endures, he strives *meaningfully*. (Italics mine). If they do not prophesy in the Campbellian sense, they are not supposed to. And it may be that they will inspire, and that someone reading them here now — which seems unlikely, considering how often most of them have been reprinted before — will in turn be moved to go forth in actual grapple with the actual trucuiences of the actual universe.

But the burden of "Mars Is Heaven!" boils down to man's old fear that nothing works, that neither God nor intelligence can save you, and that there is a burglar under the bed. There is no fulfillment here. Beautifully written, poetically effective, excellently designed, this story simply evokes the empty stuff of nightmares. Damon even says so.

"The Big Contest" is just another gimmick story, again evolved out of the childhood dream that there are superintendents under every sidewalk. The burden of "The Edge of the Sea" is that brawn and pride will take you places. At no time does the story suggest that you will have the foggiest notion of where you're going, or that you will be capable of accomplishing anything in particular once you get there.

I'm therefore not at all sure why these stories are in this book, since, with only nine entrants on the table of contents, Damon should not logically have had any time to waste in proving his point.

I feel particularly the same way about "The Sentinel." Ar-

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thur C. Clarke, educated and intelligent, is supposed to be one of the big guns in "hard" science fiction. Author of some of my favorite science-fiction novelettes though he is, he is in fact the author of a clutch of mystical novels and only one or two "hard" ones, and has a fixed and pernicious idea of how to produce a saleable short story.

That idea is to introduce an intriguing technological notion or scientific premise, and then use it to evoke frights and menaces.

It is true, indeed, that one can raise a formidable reputation for profundity by repeating, over and over again, that the universe is wide and man is very small. I think we would do well to remember, perhaps a bit more often, that while our instruments show that the universe is wide, they are our instruments and we managed somehow to build them. There is no evidence whatsoever that Man is that goddamned small.

In fact, this kind of story is infuriating in that it lends a great deal of ostensibly objective validity to what remains purely a matter of opinion. Precisely the sort of opinion which ought to be punched in the nose. However, perhaps Damon is slyly trying to demonstrate for us that this is the reaction whereby science-fiction readers are motivated to go out and bop Man's way to the rulership of the Sevagram. Or, in other words, Jules Verne inspired the submarine, and if he had been even more wrong-headed, he would have done it sooner.

Once again Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time* has been mistaken for a novel, this time by Ace. At the seventeenth World Science Fiction Convention, it received the Hugo for the best science-fiction novel of the year. It certainly is the best extended-structure literary work to have crossed my desk (in any direction) in a very long time, and I have no doubt that it deserves any number of awards. But it is a play.

This is perhaps a little difficult to tell because it's written in the first person. But the reader gains nothing from this intimacy with the supposed narrator that he could not learn by simply watching and listening. What he would observe would be the events on one set — a sporting house/hospital operated by the Spiders in their time war with the Snakes.

There is definite breaking into acts, and the chapters are in fact scenes. The dialogue used by the articulate, desperate, gestureful, small cast is stage dialogue. There is nothing in this story that could not be played under an arch, in the round or, for that matter, on a high wire.

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What the entrances, performances and exits of this little mostly human troupe accomplish is a statement about all wars, and all people. The device of a time war between two insuperable and inhuman forces far removed from these, their agents, becomes even more effective in emphasizing this universality, for the characters can and do depersonalize themselves as they destroy reality.

In years to come, then, when "they" are looking for a good play with a science-fictional basis, "they" — presumably, this same kind of people who found dramatic material in transcripts of the Nuremberg trials and in the clinical descriptions of the Marquis de Sade — need look no further.

I most urgently recommend this book to you. It's a beauty, for one thing. For another, it leads one to think that Fritz Leiber was the only science-fiction writer of any consequence — before the most recent generation, that is — who as a matter of course and conviction saw through the mores and circumscriptions which are now proving nonviable not only in commercial literature but in what we can call life as well. Since the new people — Zelazny, Delany *et al.* — are pretty unquestionably the wave of the future, and since the winners write the history books, if any of these new people have any gratitude or brains at all, Fritz Leiber is going to turn out to have been the most important science-fiction writer of the last thirty years.

The Past Through Tomorrow is billed, (by Putnam at $5.95), as Robert A. Heinlein's future history stories. That it is — I guess. I'm sure it's one of the most logical things for a publisher of science fiction to have done; a magnificient compendium, coincidentally a rewarding and perhaps accurate cross-section of a writer's career. This is a book from which there is no escape; if you have a science-fiction library then you have got to have this book in it, because it contains (nearly) all the wordage ever written to fit into Heinlein's chart of the future.

The "future history" as I'm sure you know, is the framework — written down ahead of time, in most instances — into which many stories signed Robert A. Heinlein were fitted. (Those which did not fit were often signed Anson MacDonald.) Heinlein, even when the idea of charting the assumptive future was novel as an auctorial device, had trouble keeping his imagination in bounds. Just so, when he first drew up his chart, and published

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it, had several titles and stories in it which do indeed have to be there logically, but which for one reason or another ("The Stone Pillow") were never written.

The potential problem has been solved here without any awkwardness. The titles of the unwritten stories have been dropped from the chart.

Consequently, this volume is somehow not as dramatic and impressive as its idea was back in the days when you could shake up science-fiction readers just by telling them you had an intellectual system, and really rock them back on their heels by giving them even the slightest clue that you were aware of a larger world beyond either the medium or its message.

Be that as it may, this is really a book to have — some of the finest writing this field has ever known. It simply isn't quite the book one would have predicted.

You may believe all you please (if you do so believe) that there is no qualitative difference between the talented science-fiction writers of today and the talented science-fiction writers of any previous generation since the invention of commercial science fiction. But there is such a difference. Roger Zelazny, J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss and Samuel R. Delany, the variously tall giants of our new day, are altogther different, in all significant respects save that of talent, from every talented science-fiction writer who had come along since Hugo Gernsback's time. They are different because they are in living contact with the things that are so upsetting to the modern middle class. This is a stunning reversal of the habitual situation.

I don't know any plainer way to spell out what I feel when I read the words of these people. They are of an earthshaking new kind. Not that I'm not aware of differences between them. Aldiss, for instance, seems the least talented of them. J. G. Ballard seems the least intelligent.

I am aware they did not spring full-armed from the Earth's brow. There are echoes in those new creatures of Philip K. Dick, Walter Miller, Jr. and, by all odds, Fritz Leiber. Their styles will trick you, sometimes, into thinking of Sturgeon and Bradbury — but that's simply a tribute to their acumen in choosing weapons.

(It does not matter that some of these things I am aware of may have no existence in objective truth, and it doesn't matter how any of them feel about each other, much less whether they agree with me even to the extent of permitting themselves to be grouped under this walnut shell.

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Artists usually get shoved into whatever corner is most convenient to the organizers of art.)

What a book like Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (Ace) demonstrates, garish cover, tasteless packaging, ridiculous blurbs and all, is that the wave of the future has broken over us.

Delany at present has about as little discipline in his writing as any writer who has tried his hand at this field. Even Harlan Ellison — a suddenly remote ancestor — is no less organized. In this story of, I guess, a various young man's search for apotheosis in the peculiar world of the emerging new people who have borrowed some from us — occupy our space, and intersect our heritage but are apparently free to pick what they want of it, and leave what they don't want, except it doesn't work out that way — Delany does half a dozen impossible things before breakfast, and then forgets to eat.

It doesn't really matter, however. The eyes through which Delany sees, or the tongue with which Zelazny speaks, the ear with which Aldiss listens, and the snake-dry touch of Ballard's fingertips, are the organs of comprehensible senses which happen to be connected to incomprehensible — but very lucid — brains. It would not only be dreadful if they suddenly began writing for the 1944 *Astounding*, it would be impossible.

The point is, if you are still reading everything from the viewpoint of the 1944 *Astounding*, in a few years you will find that these people — whether you approve of them or not — have picked up the field, carried it elsewhere and left you with nothing but a complete collection of yellowed, crumble-edged bewilderment.

Where, before now, was there a pulp science-fiction writer who wrote a book "primarily during a year of travel in France, Italy, Greece, Turkey and England" who had not steadfastly taken Main Street right along with him? Beside Delany's or Zelazny's cosmopolitan grasp, all the shoutings and rebellious hurrahings of even our most articulate iconoclasts are reduced to baby tantrums. Delany isn't even angry at some of the things which, by previous definition, should crush or infuriate him. Delany is deeply moved by things which few of us have ever even suspected of being tragic.

The man simply operates on a plane which Robert Heinlein never dreamed of, nor John W. Campbell Jr., nor — take a deep breath — Ted Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury or anyone else we could have put forward as being a poet

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a mere five or six years ago.

Not that I'm saying these new writers are good simply because they speak in riddles or babble in tongues. We have already spent many years worshipping the half-articulate and the half-comprehensibly poetic. No, the point is that when Delany describes to us what he has seen, what he can compute, adduce, intuit or smell in the underbrush, our reaction is to sit bolt upright and cry out, "Of course! I have that very wound myself!"

The ability to produce this reaction in people is one of the commonly accepted and apparently valid appurtenances of genius. And this field has never before had a single solitary one of them, let alone several.

Having said all this, and having urgently recommended *The Einstein Intersection* to you, I want to go on record here as saying that when you finish reading it you may be rather angry at me for steering you to a book whose structure and purpose on its own terms are not realized.

As far as I'm concerned at this point, all that means is that Delany hasn't quite gotten himself under control. But when I think of all the perfectly controlled, thoroughly dead, bad books that I and all of us have read under the impression that we were experiencing something enjoyable, and when I look forward to the explosions that reading this will create within you, I frankly don't care very much whether this is a perfect book or not.

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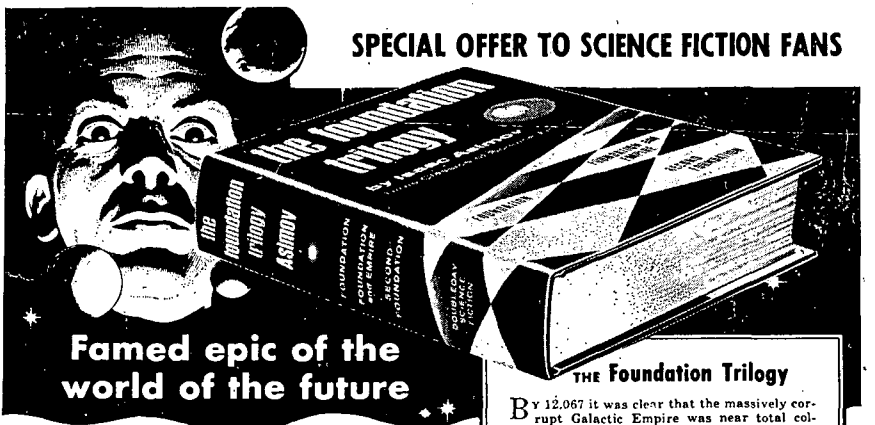

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